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WII U'S NEW WAVE
The inside track on Zelda, Splatoon, Mario, Smash Bros, Yoshi and more
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If you're not sharing, you're not part of the master plan

This year's Gamescom provided a four-pint stein's worth of talking points, not least thanks to Sony, which generated news stories even when it was revisiting old ground in the shape of Share Play. This PlayStation 4 feature, discussed originally in 2013, will become available via the v2.0 firmware scheduled for the autumn. When it goes live, it will allow you to invite others to play your games via PSN as if they're sitting next to you on your sofa, making use of the Gaikai streaming tech Sony acquired as part of a $380m investment in 2012. At Gamescom, the feature was couched as being "next-gen social", but alongside the clear consumer benefits it also represents next-gen marketing. In using Share Play, PS4 owners will be helping to promote new releases among fellow players. If you accept an invitation to help a friend tackle a particularly thorny section of *Bloodborne* and find the experience enormously satisfying, the leap to purchasing the game yourself suddenly becomes a smaller one. TV and YouTube ads? Such passive marketing methods feel old-fashioned and impotent against the power of *experiencing* something with a friend.



As a marketing tool, Share Play falls into the category of word of mouth, the most effective method of getting consumers on board. We saw its strength in action as Nintendo enjoyed the massive success of the original Wii: the system offered something unique, and the people who owned it couldn't wait to share it with their friends, who went on to buy their own. Launching Wii U in 2012 was a more difficult task because by that point the console's most overt innovation – its touchscreen interface – was already established technology. The result? Fewer shares and fewer sales.

Its online services may not always show it, but Nintendo has never been more conscious of how players relate to each other, and what that means for the company's success. From the beginning, its Wii U games have been made with the group experience in mind, and in our cover story Shigeru Miyamoto explains how it will define the console's future.



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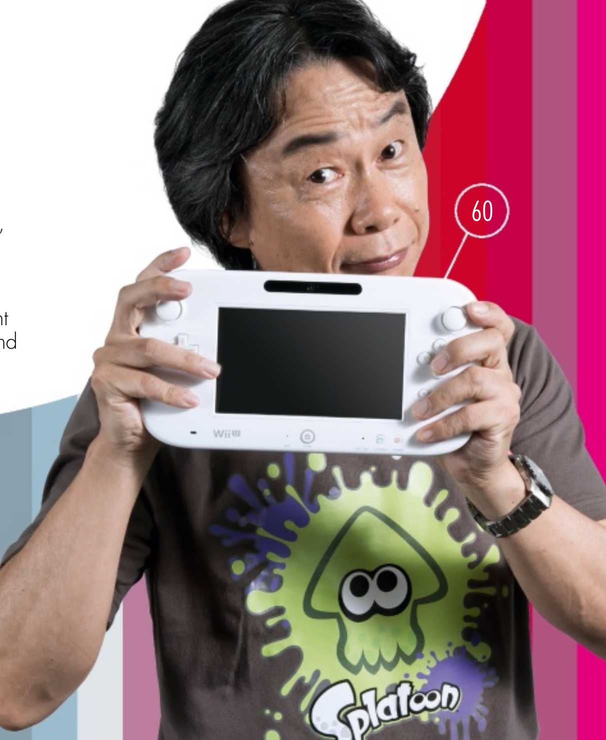
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Specialist Magazine Of The Year

Cologne wars

With momentum on its side, Sony wins the day at Gamescom, but the real stars of this show are players

Cologne's Gamescom, like E3 before it, ensured that 2014 will be remembered as the year when Microsoft and Sony united in war on the word 'exclusive', sparing no expense in their bid to strip it of its usual meaning. On PS4, it now means getting access to a mission, a map and some gear before Xbox players in *Destiny*. On Xbox One, it means a beta for multiplayer shooter *Evolve* a month before release. And on both, it means getting indie games on one console before the other, but often many months after they have launched on Steam. There are still exclusives as we know them, but they are drowning in a sea of oddly defensive posturing from platform-holder execs who are trying to create a competitive advantage where none exists.

Thankfully, this latest measuring contest did produce one jaw-dropping announcement, though it was remarkable because it was questionable, rather than for being a killer blow to the competition. Microsoft's securing of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, announced as a multiplatform game at E3 two months earlier, as an Xbox exclusive would have been a showstopper in 1997, but times have changed. Microsoft has presumably paid handsomely for the rights to the sequel to a game that failed to meet sales targets, that only broke even after heavy discounting, and whose remastered release sold more than twice as many copies on PS4 as it did on Xbox One.

In any case, what the *Tomb Raider* announcement most invited was not anger or excitement, but suspicion, which within 24 hours turned out to be entirely justified. "Exclusive to Xbox, holiday 2015." What about 2016? Microsoft PR insisted it was a permanent exclusive; developer Crystal Dynamics said the same. Nobody believed them. **Phil Spencer** later admitted the deal "has a duration" but spoke of *Tomb Raider* the franchise, rather than *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* specifically, perhaps to leave room for interpretation (and Internet arguments).

However long it may last, the *Tomb Raider* deal shows that Spencer has begun to exert his new-found influence. At GDC six months ago, weeks before his move into Marc Whitten's old corner office, he insisted that exclusives were still key to a console's success. While six months isn't enough time to get any of them made, it's certainly enough to buy some up, and the change in attitude has been immediate. This was, once again, all about the games, and in particular all about exclusives.

> Spencer said twice that Microsoft was committed to making Xbox One "the best place to play"

There was a renewed confidence, too. PR best practice says you should never mention the competition, yet within minutes Spencer was talking about PS3, even if it was in the context of transferring *Grand Theft Auto Online* progress to *GTAV* on Xbox One. A new *Forza Horizon 2* trailer proclaimed it the most social racing game ever made, a barely concealed jab at delayed PS4 racer *DriveClub*. Spencer said twice that Microsoft was committed to making Xbox One "the best place to play", a phrase used in pre-release PS4 advertising and within these pages by Andrew House and Fergal Gara. If you can't steal their market, you might as well lift their marketing.



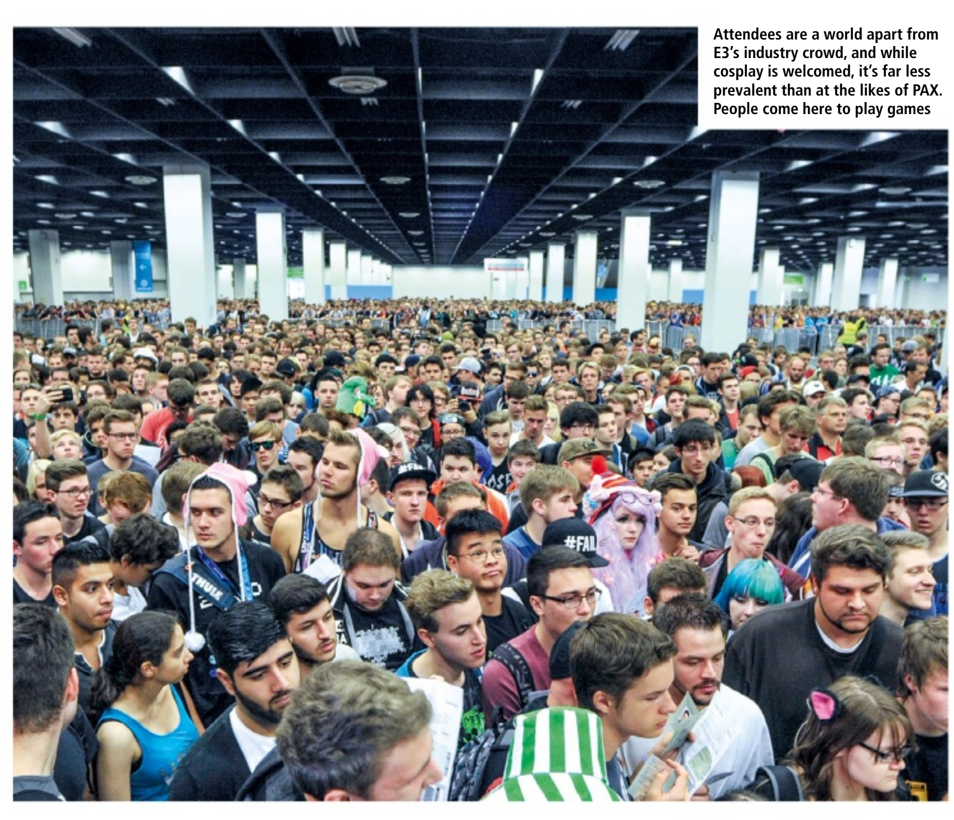
Yet Microsoft's show also emphasised a reliance on old-fashioned thinking. It showcased the seventh main *Assassin's Creed* game in as many years; the latest in the 21-year-old *FIFA* series; and the 11th *Call Of Duty* game since 2003. Sledgehammer studio head **Glen Schofield** said his team was building "a truly next-gen *Call Of Duty*", but the claim didn't stand up to close scrutiny when the demo began, kicking off with a vehicle chase that felt more like a next-gen *Chase HQ* and climaxing with a tightly scripted corridor gunfight on the Golden Gate Bridge. For all the claims of innovation, Microsoft's was still a show front-loaded with an extended look at *FIFA* and culminating in almost 20 minutes of *Halo*.

That evening, Sony began its stage show with a trio of games so markedly different from Microsoft's opening salvo that you had to wonder if it had tweaked its running order in response. Q-Games' socialist crafting game *The Tomorrow Children*, The Astronauts' detective mystery *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter* and Mike Bithell's Unity-built stealth game *Volume* sent the message that Sony is looking beyond the decades-old blockbusters. Microsoft hadn't overlooked indies, but by condensing two-dozen games into a two-minute sizzle reel and a few minute-long teasers, only giving significant stage time to *Ori And The Blind Forest*, it made its priorities obvious. Sony, meanwhile, seems to have finally realised that there is only so much worth saying about a new annual iteration that is all but guaranteed to sell by the bucketload anyway.

Instead we got Tequila Works' gorgeous *Rime*, Supermassive's teen horror *Until Dawn*, Housemarque's ▶



Consoles may have stolen most of the Gamescom headlines, but Germany has a rich history of PC games. Crytek forgot about its financial problems and showed off free-to-play MOBA *Arena Of Fate*



Attendees are a world apart from E3's industry crowd, and while cosplay is welcomed, it's far less prevalent than at the likes of PAX. People come here to play games









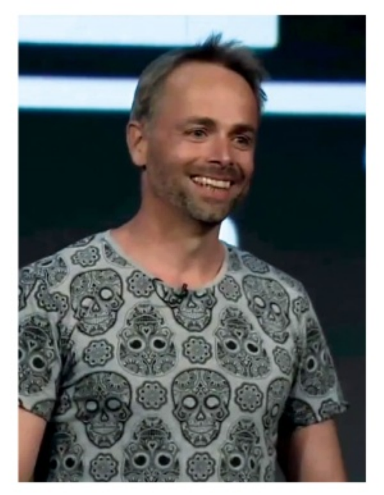
FIFA 15 (right) featured heavily in Microsoft's and EA's conferences, and on the show floor. The game matters every year, but it took on even greater import after Germany's World Cup success

WORST IN SHOW

EA fails to offer the lineup to repair its damaged reputation



Not everyone got the memo that Gamescom matters: EA limped through its conference with overlong looks at its coming slate. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* looked pretty, intricate and quite dull; *FIFA* lead producer David Rutter did his best to sell the latest raft of tweaks; and while there's plenty to like about *The Sims 4*, a stage is not the place to show it off. With just one new announcement in BioWare's *Shadow Realms*, the show ended with *Battlefield Hardline*, recently delayed to 2015. Without the barrage of CG teasers and concept pieces that just about rescued its E3, EA painted a picture of a company with little to shout about.





Michel Ancel (above) may have set up his own studio in Wild Sheep, but he'll still be working at Ubisoft at the same time as building *Wild* for PS4. SCEE chief Jim Ryan (right) talks PS4 Share Play

Alienation and Ruffian's *Hollowpoint*. We got *Wild*, an incredibly ambitious open-world game from *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel. We got *Tearaway Unfolded*, rumoured ahead of the show to be a straight port of the Vita version, but which has been smartly retooled around DualShock 4. While Microsoft's show was led by Phils Spencer and Harrison, Sony did its best to keep the suits out of the way. Mike Bithell was animated, self-effacing and thoroughly personable. Dean Hall, here to announce a PS4 version of *DayZ*, marvelled at how he had gone from unknown modder to Sony's stage in the space of three years.

When SCEE boss Jim Ryan did take the stage, it was to drop a bomb, announcing that PS4 had passed ten million units sold – and clarifying that meant sold through, not shipped. He would return to reintroduce Share Play, sketched out by David Perry when PS4 was unveiled in 2013 and set to launch alongside system software 2.0 in the autumn. It lets you invite an online friend into a game for co-op or competitive multiplayer, or to take over control of your singleplayer game, for 60 minutes without them needing to own the title. It is an application of Gaikai that stands to benefit everyone involved, and no doubt its warm reception had Microsoft looking once more at its own cloud strategy.

There were bum notes, of course. Activision's Eric Hirshberg is uncommonly charismatic for a gaming exec, but he still sucked the atmosphere out of the room with an overlong segment on *Destiny*. While there must have been high fives at Sony when Hideo Kojima agreed to a stage appearance, we would've loved to have seen the reaction when he said he would be talking about cardboard boxes. And while expected, it was disappointing to have it confirmed that Europe won't see streaming service PlayStation Now until next year.

You sense both camps will have come away satisfied, but Sony will be the happier. It still has the more powerful console and has got it into vastly more homes than the competition, remains competitive on price, and displayed the greater creativity here in both software and services. Microsoft is back on course, but it's a company treading water, waiting for the games that will properly resonate with Spencer's vision and the audience he courts.

What both showed was that Gamescom has become a vital part of the industry calendar. It's still no E3, but there is diminishingly little room at the LA show for anything but the biggest of hitters, and Koelnmesse provides a valuable opportunity to turn attention to riskier, less glamorous, fresher games.

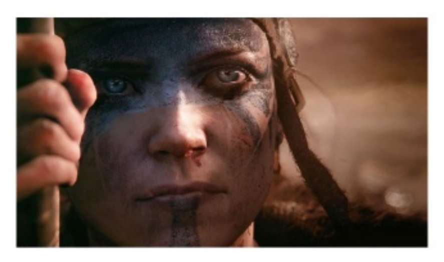
While E3 masquerades as a trade show, Gamescom opens its doors to the public on the second day and allows access to anyone for the price of a ticket. Its attendees fund their visits from their own pockets, not a company credit card. Within minutes of the doors opening, a queue was formed for *Bloodborne* that was best measured in time rather than length, those in line accepting an eight-hour wait as a small price to pay to play a game still months from shelves.

It's the sheer enthusiasm real players bring to Gamescom that makes it special, people coming from across Europe for a weekend in the city exuding the kind of joy only so many fans converging for one purpose can bring. Developers can present their game demonstrations as pure fan service, and it makes for a spectacular show. Within an hour, the halls are rammed, more are opened to handle the overflow, and queues outside are frozen as players filter into the giant complex. Koelnmesse dwarfs the LA Convention Center, but Gamescom has now outgrown its venue. Crowds shuffle, barely moving. Cologne's hotels are fully booked a month in advance, and those eight-hour queues were formed by players sprinting as soon as the doors opened.

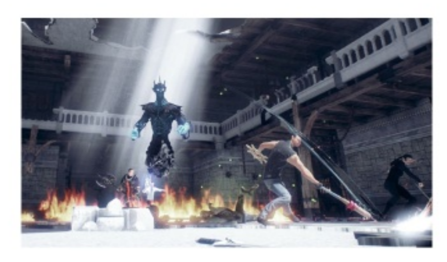
E3 remains the brightest possible spotlight for the year's games, but Gamescom might just be the industry's greatest celebration of them. Every player brings to the show a sincere love for the medium, and every night you hear from developers struck with appreciation that anyone would get on a plane, book a hotel room, and spend hours in an odoriferous sauna to play five minutes of their work. Sony and Microsoft might have taken all the headlines, but Gamescom's real winner was, once again, the player. ■

SCARE TACTICS
As reveals go, Konami's *Silent Hills* announcement was among the most memorable. Brief footage of a new horror title named *PT* from unknown studio 7780s appeared among footage of Sony's exclusives, followed by the news that the interactive teaser was available to download from PSN. Hours later, Twitch broadcaster SoapyWarpig found the secret ending: the looping demo was, in fact, our first taste of a new *Silent Hill* game from Hideo Kojima and film director Guillermo Del Toro. The stunt was a ballsy one, but also a reminder of just how much ammunition Sony has when it can afford to hide such a huge announcement away in a piece of stealth marketing.

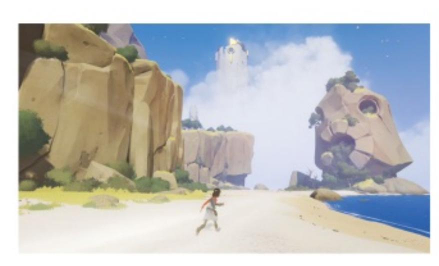




HELLBLADE PS4 (OTHERS TBC)
DmC proved Ninja Theory's grasp of thirdperson combat has improved immeasurably; now the studio must maintain its form without Capcom's oversight. *Hellblade* will be self-published and digital only, the studio promising "brutal, uncompromising combat".



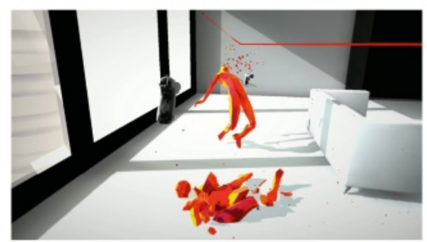
SHADOW REALMS PC
While it's hard to get too excited about another four-versus-one game, BioWare's plans for narrative in *Shadow Realms* are intriguing. Set in a modern fantasy world, the story will be delivered episodically and the world is said to change accordingly.



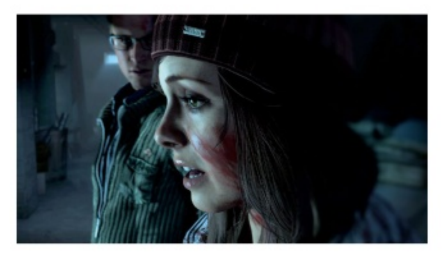
RIME PS4
Announced last year, Tequila Works' PS4 exclusive continues to look like a Studio Ghibli mashup of *Ico* and *Wind Waker*. While we're sold on the style, concerns persist. Biggest of all is the fact the studio was also behind humdrum zombie game *Deadlight*.



QUANTUM BREAK XBOX ONE
Finally, an overdue first look at *Quantum Break* being played and, as expected, it's thoroughly easy on the eyes. However, it's also a cover shooter, and the implementation of its protagonist's time powers will be key if this is to live up to its technical promise.



SUPERHOT PC, XBOX ONE (OTHERS TBC)
From game jam to Microsoft's stage within 12 months? Not bad at all, Blue Brick. An FPS in which time only moves when you do, *Superhot*'s gunfights are tests of logic, not reactions. You can play the prototype online for free; if you haven't yet, you're missing out.



UNTIL DAWN PS4
Once a PS3 exclusive, *Until Dawn* re-emerges on PS4 having lost its Move controls, borrowed *Killzone: Shadow Fall*'s engine and gained a *Heavy Rain*-like structure. In this riff on Cabin In The Woods, any of the cast can live or die depending on your actions.



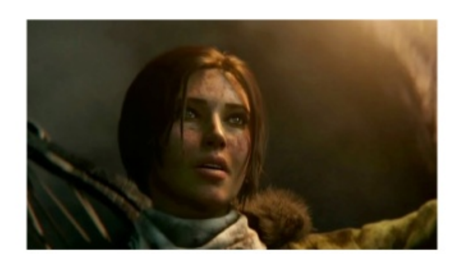
SCREAM RIDE 360, XBOX ONE
When Phil Harrison said Microsoft had secured an exclusive from Frontier, it seemed for a second like it had bought up *Elite: Dangerous*. Instead it's this spin on *Roller Coaster Tycoon* that's not only about creating, but also riding and destroying designs.



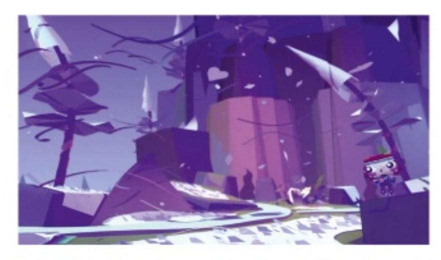
WILD PS4
Michel Ancel was Sony's greatest coup, the creator praising PS4 for its ease of development and power. *Wild*, the debut game from new outfit Wild Sheep, is set in an open world the size of Europe that features dynamic weather and seasons, and playable wildlife.



DAYZ PC, PS4 (OTHERS TBC)
Dean Hall said that by showing games like his on big press conference stages, the industry had "turned a corner". He insists PS4 development will benefit the PC game, promising improved visuals and UI. Due on consoles when it's finished, so don't hold your breath.



RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER 360, XBOX ONE
With no new footage to show, Microsoft focused on announcing the exclusive that wasn't. It's still early days for a game due next Christmas, where it now represents the counter to *Uncharted 4*. After that, who knows, but it seems sure to end up elsewhere in time.



TEARAWAY UNFOLDED PS4
Media Molecule isn't the type of studio to do a straight port, and held a game jam to devise concepts around DualShock 4's featureset. The new ideas work well, but how PS4 will handle the late-game sections using touch, tilt and voice commands remains to be seen.



THE TOMORROW CHILDREN PS4
Q-Games may be known for the 2D *Pixeljunk* series, but president Dylan Cuthbert reminded everyone that he cut his teeth making 3D games like *Star Fox*. *The Tomorrow Children* is no space shooter, but a mining and crafting game in postapocalyptic communist garb.

Bend it like Platinum

Why the Japanese studio behind Bayonetta is working on a Nickelodeon licence

PlatinumGames stands among the finest studios in the world thanks to its pursuit of new IP and original ideas, both of which have come to define the studio since its formation following the closure of Clover. So why would an outstanding Japanese developer with a history of carving its own path elect to take on a licensed game for Nickelodeon based on an American cartoon?

The Legend Of Korra is a popular animated spinoff from Avatar: The Last Airbender, with 52 episodes planned to span over four 'books', or seasons. While it has been praised for its subversive story arc, which addresses the societal ills of its fantasy world, the main draw is still the action: the titular heroine is able to 'bend' the elements of water, earth, fire and air to unleash brutal attacks.

It was this action that inspired Activision to pick up the licence from Nickelodeon, with which it has previously worked on games based on SpongeBob SquarePants and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and in turn to engage Platinum to develop the game for 360, PC, PS3, PS4 and Xbox One. "We couldn't think of a better studio than PlatinumGames for this project – in terms of everything they do, it was right up their alley," Activision producer **Robert Conkey** says.

When the tie-up was announced, Platinum fans and game journalists alike were sent scurrying for Wikipedia, having never heard of the TV series – but the staff at Platinum were in a similar situation. "The Legend Of Korra hasn't been shown in Japan, so I didn't know it," Platinum producer **Atsushi Kurooka** admits. "Activision sent us some video, and I thought the quality was amazing. Also, the direction Activision wanted to take, with smooth action and kung-fu attacks, seemed like a good fit for us."

Even so, *Korra* is an outlier for Platinum. The closest the studio has previously come to a licensed game is its rescue job on *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, and its key names' focus is absorbed on *Bayonetta 2* for Wii U and Xbox One exclusive *Scalebound*. Kurooka and director Eiro Shirahama, meanwhile, are relative unknowns. With a background in programming that includes a stint at SNK subsidiary Nazca on the *Metal Slug* team, Kurooka joined Platinum in 2012 as assistant producer on *The Wonderful 101*, while Shirahama is a Capcom alumnus who worked on Platinum's *MadWorld* and *Anarchy Reigns* as designer and lead designer respectively.

> "There's also an extreme mode, which has the craziness you've come to expect from Platinum"

Still, Platinum's reputation is hard-won, and *Korra*'s action seems fast and fluid, focused on a mix of martial arts and ranged magic. It's all as you'd expect, despite a novel way of working for the studio. "The approach is completely different than making an original game, because we have to regularly check in with the licence holder for approval as we go," Kurooka says. "But the upside is that the character and enemy design had all been done for us, so the burden of art design was greatly reduced."

The team size and length of the development cycle remain secret, but Conkey says the project was started last year for release by the end of 2014 – tight, but not unreasonable for a budget download title with a short play time.



Activision producer Robert Conkey says Platinum's gift for strong female lead characters is one benefit of working with the Osaka studio

"We've customised elements from the show with great care so that they suit being in a game," Kurooka says. "It's a downloadable title being sold at just $15, but I believe it offers much more value than you'd expect at that price. I think it will appeal not only to fans of Korra, but to Platinum fans, too."

Those demographics couldn't be more different. Platinum is celebrated for its punishing-yet-rewarding combat, but with the licence comes a story-focused fanbase that won't necessarily be expecting much of a challenge.

An easy setting will address this and, as Conkey says, "There is also a normal mode, which is designed for players who are decently versed in action, and then there's also an Extreme mode, which has the craziness that you've come to expect from a Platinum game."

But this isn't just a Platinum game – Nickelodeon is closely involved, as are the show's writers. And while the show draws inspiration from Japanese anime, *Korra* marks the first game to be born outside the studio's home nation. Series fans should have a treat in store, but far more intriguing is how the collaboration will affect the output of a studio that has always played by its own rules. ■



***The Legend Of Korra* is licensed from a TV series lauded for its animation as well as its storylines**

Korra has an array of abilities related to 'bending' the elements, giving her powerful attacks. As such, the game features ranged as well as close combat. But she'll be stripped of her powers at first, and have to regain them









A section in which Korra rides her polar bear dog (centre left) looks to offer variety, as will a pro bending mode (left). Combat (above), meanwhile, puts emphasis on charged attacks, but you'll have to watch out for chi blockers and triads of fellow benders (centre right)

AVATAR SELECT

Korra's second game is a 3DS strategy title made in the US



Platinum is not the only developer working on a *Legend Of Korra* title for Activision. 3DS will get a very different game courtesy of Webfoot Technologies, an Illinois company more used to creating licensed fare. Webfoot's version of *Korra*, subtitled *A New Era Begins*, is a strategy RPG that implements Korra's elemental Avatar powers as she and her companions traverse the terrain in a rather more thoughtful manner. Details are still slight, but the 3DS game is set in the same period as the console version, and could make an intriguing companion to what is being considered the 'main' game by Platinum.

Spatial awareness

How the creator of XTODIE: Ragnarok is exploring the challenges of stand-up VR

The formative experiments in modern VR gaming have established one rule of thumb: it's much less disorienting to navigate a virtual world when your avatar is sitting down. *Elite: Dangerous* and *EVE: Valkyrie* ensconce you in a cockpit and thus avoid the disconnect between what your body is doing and what your eyes are seeing, but if Oculus Rift and Sony's Project Morpheus are to succeed, they can't be bound to flight sticks and steering wheels. Yet firstperson action games in VR raise questions: how will your brain handle motion when your body is certain it's stationary? Should VR adventures be played sitting down? And if not, how do you avoid accidents when a player is mobile but effectively blinded in their own living room?

XTODIE: Ragnarok is a horror game based on Norse mythology in which players are hunted by fantastic creatures in a stark, snowy wilderness. At shows and onstage, creator **Julie Heyde** insists it be played standing up for immersion's sake, but also as part of an ongoing experiment meant to better understand VR gaming.

"I would be sitting down and playing with the Rift, and it didn't actually feel real, so I decided to do a stand-up VR game," she says. "The first time [players] try *XTODIE* with Rift, you see how much of a difference it is to them. When you just play it as a desktop game, there's a snow giant coming towards you, and you get scared. But suddenly, when you're in a 3D environment, you can't get away, you're scared and running for your life, and it's a whole other experience."

Heyde calls *XTODIE* an active VR game. There are no stick-bound controls for turning, only for going forward (side-stepping is under consideration, pending motion-sickness experiments), so players must move on the spot to explore the space around them. At July's Develop conference, one player during Heyde's presentation began inching his way forward towards the edge of the stage, immersed in the VR space and unaware of the danger. It proved the point of Heyde's talk: the challenge of developing a physical VR game without players getting injured.

"I like horror games. I like scaring people and I like getting scared myself," Heyde says. "But it's a whole other thing designing [horror] when you don't want people to get so scared they actually fall over. Early on, when it was just the cave level, people were running around like crazy; they'd scream and so on. I'd just throw people straight in to the VR experience and they'd [be unsteady]. When I added the preceding level, the ice landscape of Jotunheim, it was a chance for people to find their feet."

> "It's a whole other thing designing horror when you don't want people to get so scared they fall over"

The first level acts as a tutorial, with a more open space and flatter path; Heyde found hills and bumps made players more inclined to move on the spot, and pursuits through tight caverns saw them moving by dangerous amounts. One player was so inclined towards drifting that Heyde was forced to grip him by the shoulders throughout the demo.

"People need to get used to VR at their own pace," she explains. "Maybe when people are more [VR literate], we'll be able to drop them in faster, but for now we need that open space they can take at their own pace before throwing them into the cave. People seem to be aware that there is still a physical space around them, but unless you introduce VR slowly, they tend to lean and tremble enough to be in danger."



Julie Heyde, *XTODIE* creator and hacker

The simple controls, very similar to *Resident Evil*'s classic 'tank' controls, have dramatically reduced incidents of motion sickness, Heyde says, at the expense of making escapes from pursuing giants more challenging and more terrifying. Like *Resident Evil* and *Alone In The Dark*, Heyde's work feels like a prototype – the first steps towards something new.

The *XTODIE* demo lasts 45 minutes, a long time in a VR space. "Standing up is physically demanding," Heyde says, "but that's why the game has to be active. Standing is hard, but so long as you're moving – just on the spot – it's much easier. The biggest thing I see after players have been immersed for that long is how hard it is to come back to reality."



Oculus has an extensive list of best-practice guidelines for VR development, but creatives such as Heyde are just scratching the surface of what will and won't work in the real world. With limited resources, their trials pale in comparison to the usability testing possible at Sony, Oculus and large studios, but in a way they are also freer to push at VR's limits.

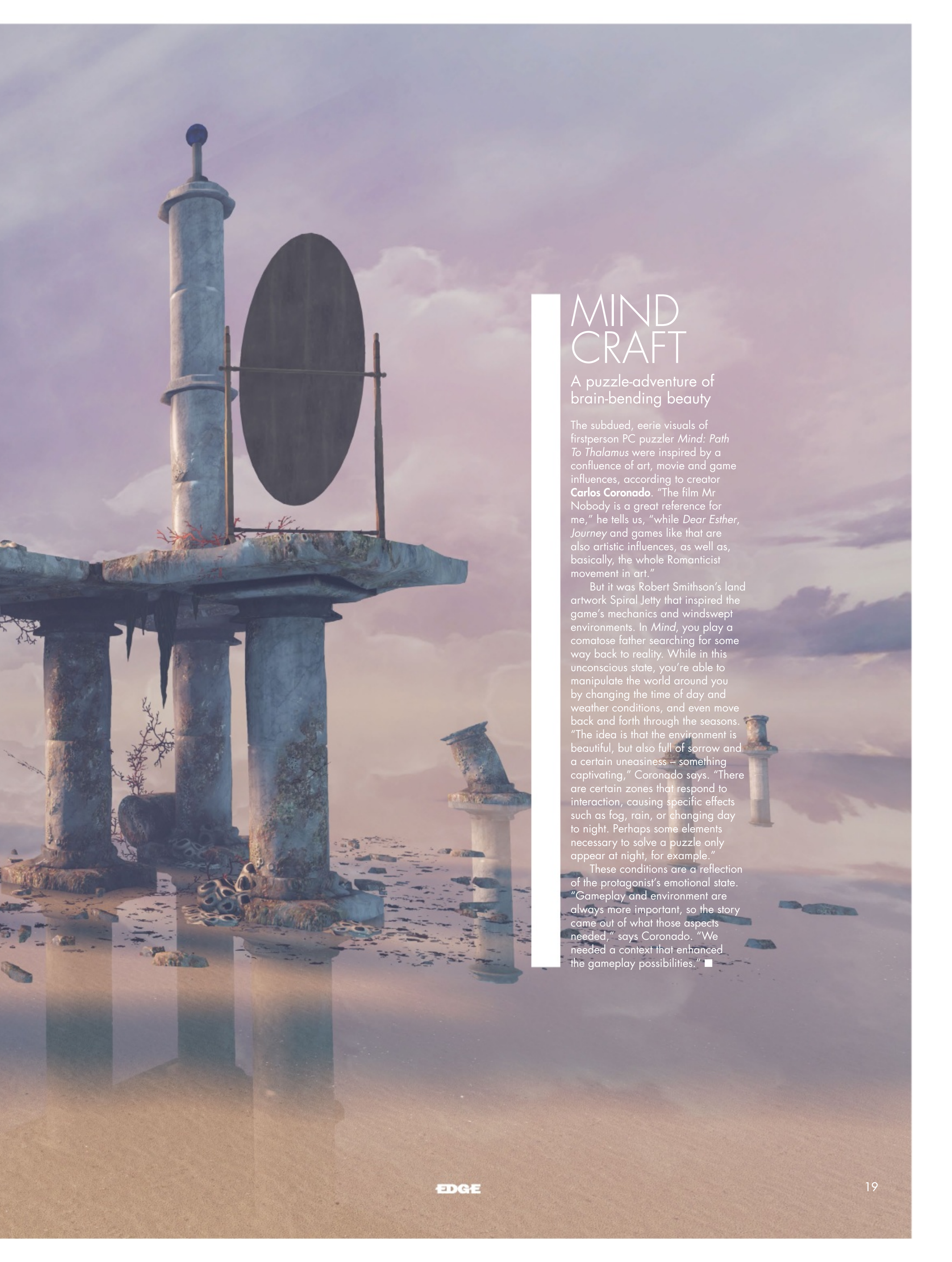
"Triple-A developers [are mostly] working with sit-down games, it seems," Heyde says. "I guess it's a liability issue as well as a design one, but I was so happy when I saw Sony's Morpheus at GDC for the first time, and that you were actually standing up and playing it with two Move controllers. But then, of course, if you're playing at home how do you make sure you don't keep hitting people with your Move controllers? We have a lot of work to do." ■



Norse goddess Freya was said to weep red gold when her husband was absent. The personification of sexuality, love and death is behind your snowbound torment in ***XTODIE***



In this area, you'll bounce a beam of light between mirrors, but you must also pay careful attention to the reflection of the crumbling architecture in the wet sand, which reveals invisible paths



MIND CRAFT

A puzzle-adventure of brain-bending beauty

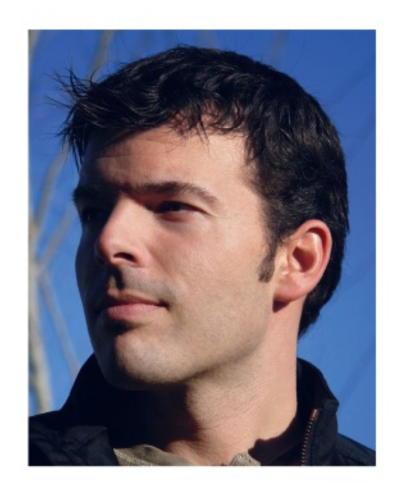
The subdued, eerie visuals of firstperson PC puzzler *Mind: Path To Thalamus* were inspired by a confluence of art, movie and game influences, according to creator **Carlos Coronado**. "The film Mr Nobody is a great reference for me," he tells us, "while *Dear Esther*, *Journey* and games like that are also artistic influences, as well as, basically, the whole Romanticist movement in art."

But it was Robert Smithson's land artwork Spiral Jetty that inspired the game's mechanics and windswept environments. In *Mind*, you play a comatose father searching for some way back to reality. While in this unconscious state, you're able to manipulate the world around you by changing the time of day and weather conditions, and even move back and forth through the seasons. "The idea is that the environment is beautiful, but also full of sorrow and a certain uneasiness – something captivating," Coronado says. "There are certain zones that respond to interaction, causing specific effects such as fog, rain, or changing day to night. Perhaps some elements necessary to solve a puzzle only appear at night, for example."

These conditions are a reflection of the protagonist's emotional state. "Gameplay and environment are always more important, so the story came out of what those aspects needed," says Coronado. "We needed a context that enhanced the gameplay possibilities." ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I have decided to hit the reset button and move on from BioWare. Though there's never an easy time to make a change like this, I believe this is the best time for it."

Casey Hudson finds the politest possible way of saying, "You can take your *Mass Effect* and stick it"



"The Board of Film and Video Censors deem some of the content too controversial. **This does sound like it could have come from one of El Presidente's edicts."**

Kalypso's **Stefan Marcinek** calls the Thai junta out for enacting *Tropico 5*'s satire



"People were on pins and needles about anything untoward I might say. First, they had me do interviews with someone from PR. Later, they just decided that I shouldn't be in the press at all."

Nintendo's former indie chief **Dan Adelman** on why he quit

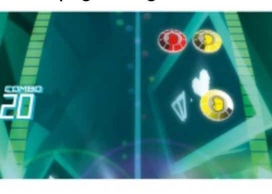
"It was very funny. [They said,] 'We like to do original properties,' and they were a 100 per cent licensed, sequel-driven company. It was beautiful."



InXile's **Brian Fargo** recalls a *Wasteland 2* pitch meeting with THQ. Lord knows how the publisher ever went bust

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Neon FM*
Manufacturer Unit-E Technologies

Maryland-based Unit-E studios is a relative newcomer to the arcade scene, only founded in 2011. And with its youth, it has brought some fresh perspective, challenging traditional arcade game design with its debut offering, *Neon FM*.

The gameplay is familiar enough, though: a beat-matching rhythm-action game in which you must tap one or more brightly coloured buttons in time with the plummeting circles onscreen. It's predictably frantic stuff, but an easy option reduces the active buttons from five to three. More surprisingly, the cabinet offers a try-before-you-buy feature to sample songs before spending any money. And once you are playing, performing badly won't end your go – instead, the game will reduce the difficulty as you play, allowing you to get to the end of the song every time. It's an extremely welcoming setup, especially considering you pay per song rather than, as with many other arcade rhythm-action games, per set.

Unit-E will push new content to machines automatically, updating them every week, and players can use their phones to log in and keep track of scores. There will even be a mobile version of the game, which will deliver an industry first in the form of cabinet and mobile crossplay multiplayer, enabling local or online competitive play. Unit-E may lack experience, then, but the small company looks on track to set some new industry standards.

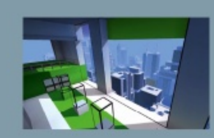

Imagination

WEBSITE

Grumpy Gamer
bit.ly/maniacdd

On his blog, Ron Gilbert has posted the original *Maniac Mansion* design document that he and co-creator Gary Winnick used to pitch the title to Lucasfilm's game division in the mid-'80s. It's a nostalgia-tinged window into a simpler era of development, including a fascinatingly detailed explanation of how a point-and-click interface might work, and the whole thing is illustrated with charming pen-and-ink drawings. "It was just the two of us for a long time," Gilbert writes in his post. "Eventually, David Fox would come on to help with SCUMM scripting. Three people. The way games were meant to be made." There are plenty of ideas in the document that didn't survive the transition to the full game as well, most notably Gilbert and Winnick's original intention to have no player deaths at all.





VIDEO

Edgecraft
bit.ly/edgecraftyt

Minecraft has proven fertile ground for imitation. Whether it's the USS Enterprise, Game Of Thrones' Westeros or the opening moments of *BioShock*, the game's bricks have been manipulated into all manner of familiar shapes by dedicated creators with time (and often smart software) on their hands. Still, few have ever managed to get quite as close to their inspirations as Michael Trikosko recreation of the clean dystopia of *Mirror's Edge*. It's so similar, in fact, that you might not notice it's running in *Minecraft* at all on first inspection. We very much doubt that Steve can match Faith's agility, however.

WEB GAME

Even The Stars
bit.ly/evenstars

Originally conceived as an entry for the Space Cowboy game jam, *Even The Stars* has evolved into something more complete. Available to play as a download or in browser, creator Pol Clarissou's space adventure allows you to explore a universe by entering six-digit coordinates into your ship's nav computer. There might be nothing to see when you arrive, or you might stumble across a planet housing the artefacts of an ancient civilisation. If you find a planet, you can go into orbit to explore its surface and touch down next to anything of interest, and you can remark on discoveries in your log, which gradually builds up a story of your adventure. There's a catch, though: with each warp jump, you lose a unit of fuel and grow a little older. When you run out of fuel, your journey comes to a close.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

CHAIR

RH Mereo
bit.ly/edgechair

The Mereo, from UK chair specialist RH, doesn't have built-in speakers or a drinks holder – it's not even wipe clean. But RH is presenting its latest creation as an alternative for people who care about their backs and can manage not to spill their drinks during extended play sessions. The Mereo's 2PP technology allows the chair to flex and move while still supporting the bits of you that do the same: your hips and knees. The chair, which was styled by the Swedish design house responsible for the Koenigsegg hypercar, reshapes itself around you while maintaining your posture, feeling almost like a Steadicam arm. RH claims that the chair promotes good circulation, too, but while we can't attest to that, it certainly feels like an extremely comfortable throne on which to play games.

continue

***TLOUR*'s 30fps lock**
Finally showing naysayers that 60 really does matter

Epic Games
A big company *opening* a UK studio? The mind boggles

A new nope
Kojima's *Silent Hills* teaser is terrifyingly effective marketing

Soul of a hero
Miyazaki's *Bloodborne* stands out a mile at Gamescom 2014

quit

***TLOUR*'s photo mode**
We're never actually going to finish this playthrough, are we?

Crysis point
Crytek's fall from grace is a case study in how not to manage growth

Subs copies
EA does another Origin with the PS Plus-alike EA Access. We'll pass

Shite trap
Creators pitch a sequel to FMV nadir *Night Trap* on Kickstarter

TWEETS

I would pay a lot of money to be in the room when the Twitch CEO is asked to explain donger and Hitler related chatlogs to the Google board.
Mike Boxleiter @fucrate
Designer, Mikengreg Games

Volume, a game set in 2054, is based in a devolved England, so, if you're Scottish, please consider the impact on my backstory when you vote.
Mike Bithell @mikeBithell
Creator, Thomas Was Alone

Dear Ubisoft, dial back the number of *ACs* FFS. What's next, *Assassin's Creed Taco-stand*? Actually I'd play that.
David Goldfarb @locust9
Game director, Payday 2

I love playing *Mario Kart 8* so much, I'm going to just pretend I didn't see that Mercedes DLC announcement. LALALALALA!
Tim Schafer @TimOfLegend
Founder, Double Fine



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PLAYSTATION®4 GAMES CALENDAR 2014

YOUR GUIDE TO WHAT'S ON PS4.

SEPTEMBER

SEPT 9



SEPT	5	WARRIORS OROCHI 3 ULTIMATE
SEPT	9	DESTINY
SEPT	12	NHL 15
SEPT	19	NATURAL DOCTRINE
SEPT	19	DISNEY INFINITY 2.0
SEPT	26	EA SPORTS FIFA 15

OCTOBER

OCT 10



OCT	7	ALIEN ISOLATION
OCT	10	DRIVECLUB
OCT	10	SKYLANDERS TRAP TEAM
OCT	10	NBA 2K15
OCT	17	THE EVIL WITHIN
OCT	21	EVOLVE
OCT	24	JUST DANCE 2015
OCT	24	SAMURAI WARRIORS
OCT	28	ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY
OCT	31	WWE 2K15

NOVEMBER

NOV 21



NOV	4	CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE
NOV	11	THE CREW
NOV	18	FAR CRY 4
NOV	21	DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION
NOV	21	LITTLEBIGPLANET 3
NOV	TBC	PROJECT CARS

COMING SOON

- SINGSTAR: ULTIMATE PARTY
- MIDDLE EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR
- LEGO BATMAN 3: BEYOND GOTHAM
- MINECRAFT PS4 EDITION
- GRAND THEFT AUTO V

THIS IS FOR THE PLAYERS

VISIT UK.PLAYSTATION.COM/PS4/GAMES
TO FIND OUT MORE AND VIEW FUTURE RELEASES



My Favourite Game
Iain Cook

The guitarist and synth virtuoso talks cardboard programming and how Intelligent Systems sustained his former band

Best known for being one-third of Chvrches, **Iain Cook** is also an established composer for film and TV, a record producer, and has plied his craft for Les Tinglies, Aereogramme and the still-active The Unwinding Hours. Despite these commitments, he's found a way for music and games to coexist.

You're a prolific composer of film and TV scores, but no games yet.
This is true! It's something that I'm quite surprised hasn't come up over the years, given the people I know who make videogames; it's something I'd definitely be interested in. But I'm not really that keen on doing a film-score-type thing… I'm more interested in the things indie developers are doing these days – doing something a little bit different, and finding ways to make music and videogames work together, rather than just a layer of Hollywood-style backing group music. That's often the case, especially with big-budget videogames, getting big composers like Clint Mansell and Harry Gregson-Williams to do these blockbuster games. Obviously, there's a place for that, but it's not really advancing the art form in any way. I think if I was to get involved with videogames, it would be something that was a bit smarter and a bit more inventive, but don't ask me what!

You thanked Intelligent Systems and *Advance Wars* in Sleep And Release's liner notes. What was that about?
Back in the early Aereogramme days, the tours were pretty gruelling, because we were playing small venues that weren't sold out and there was really no budget. We were lucky enough to have six-week American tours, though. But the thing that really held the band together, I guess, was that we all had GameBoy Advance SPs with copies of *Advance Wars*, *Tetris* and *Mario Kart*. And we just played and played and played during the six-to-ten-hour drives every day. *Advance Wars* was something that we really bonded over and we played it obsessively. I was shit at it, by the way! Actually, there were a lot of videogame samples on that record that we, er, didn't disclose for copyright reasons! It probably doesn't matter any more. I'm not saying there is, but there *might* be samples from *Defender*, *Q*Bert* and *Silent Hill 2*. There might not be, of course.

"There were a lot of videogame samples on that record that we, er, didn't disclose for copyright reasons"

While we're on the subject of classics, when did you get into games?
I suppose it was probably either seeing some older guys playing a *Space Invaders* cabinet at the local community centre a long time ago, or when a friend of my dad's lent us an Atari 2600 and I played *Combat*. Those two things I remember really clearly. After that, the earliest memory I have is when I got my ZX Spectrum in 1983. I remember being so obsessed with the idea of owning one that, before Christmas, I got my mum to give me the manual so I could read how to program in BASIC! I had a big cutout picture of the rubber keys from Your Sinclair that I would practice on. The first thing I did was to program music on it, so I guess there's a kind of symmetry in there.

Would you say videogames sparked your creative side, then?
It probably did, come to think of it. I'd been going to piano lessons since I was about five or six, so there was always music around me, and I was always involved in it in some way. But it wasn't until I got fed up with videogames and picked up a guitar at about 15 that I realised that music was something I really wanted to do, rather than something that had been forced on me! I loved Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix, and I taught myself to play guitar from there. But then, at the end of the SNES era, I got back into videogames again when I realised that the two could coexist!

And which game is your all-time favourite?
It's really hard to pin it down, but it's definitely a toss up between *Mario Kart* and *Street Fighter*… Specifically *Mario Kart: Double Dash* on GameCube and *Mario Kart DS*, and *Street Fighter IV* on Xbox and all the iterations thereafter. But if I had to choose one, I would say it's probably *Street Fighter*. I've spent hundreds and hundreds of hours playing that game. I don't know why it's grabbed me in the way that it has. I played a lot of *Super Street Fighter II* when it came out on SNES, but then I went away from it for a long time. I just feel that in *IV*, everything's come together. Everything they've added has worked – the Focus thing worked, the Ultra thing is a bit broken, but that's kind of part of the fun. And it's just really well balanced. ■

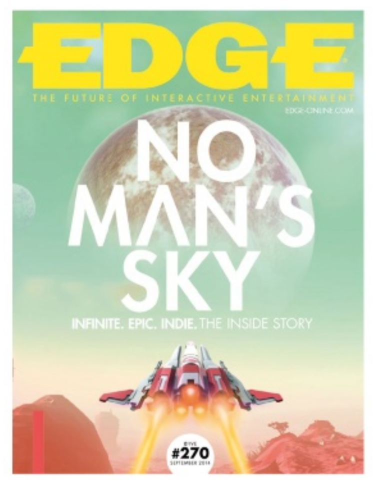
TAKE A PEW PEW
Chvches was formed in 2011 when university friends Iain Cook and Martin Doherty asked Lauren Mayberry to sing on some demos they'd put together. The band's second single, The Mother We Share, was released at the tail end of 2012 and generated a wave of hype around the trio. In 2013, Chvrches released its debut album, The Bones Of What You Believe, to huge critical and chart success. A memorable set at Glastonbury on the John Peel Stage earlier this year continued the group's ascension, and a Reading Festival appearance is also on the tour schedule.





Martin Doherty, Lauren Mayberry and Iain Cook have been praised for their blend of retro synth sounds and advanced techniques

DISPATCHES OCTOBER



Issue 270

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an Atlas headset from Turtle Beach Inc





Turtle Beach's **Atlas** headset (RRP £119.99) is compatible with 360, Xbox One and PC setups

Power's out

Gamers are stingy. Picture the scene: every year outside an Apple store around about September time, there are huge queues for the latest phone that will change people's lives and improve their standard of living (as the marketing effort would have you believe). All this for the bargain price of £600. What amazes me is that 12 months earlier, people were lining up for the phone they currently have in their pockets. They are paying a premium price for a menial upgrade every single year.

Now look at the new consoles released last November. The PS4 is a runaway success, with close to double the sales of the more expensive (at the time) Xbox One. Scrub for a second that the Xbox came with Kinect. Scrub the fact that the console is slightly weaker hardware wise. And focus on the one reason why it hasn't been selling as well as the PS4: price. The Xbox One was a good £80 more expensive in the UK, putting a lot of people off purchasing one, and instead going for the cheaper PS4. My main issue with this – and we also saw it in the previous generation with PS3 – is that gamers don't seem willing to spend more than £400 on a new games console.

"We can't keep expecting to pay £300 for these machines and expect them to outperform PCs"

In my opinion this is hurting the games industry as whole. With a lot of countries now recovering from a recession, it's clear that both Microsoft and Sony were not willing to make a loss on their next generation consoles. But what this has created is consoles that barely run games in 1080p and at 60fps. This is causing heated debates on a lot of game forums and websites over which console is the more powerful. But this is overlooking a bigger problem: this generation of consoles is underpowered. Even the PS4 is unable to run certain games at high framerates (*The Order: 1886*), or at high resolutions (*Battlefield 4*). This should be a standard that 'next-gen' consoles should be achieving, but we can't keep expecting to pay 300-odd quid for these machines and then expect them to outperform or match high-spec PCs. If we can spend £600 a year on a new phone, why can't we spend £600 every five to eight years on a new console that is truly worthy of the label 'next gen'?
David King

The difference being that you don't buy consoles on monthly contracts, of course. And when you upgrade your phone, your old games come with you. Ultimately, though, the inner workings of the day-one £600 iPhone purchaser probably isn't something the world will ever understand completely.

V0.99 problems

With the recent influx of early access games I've been thinking about how there's a certain 'sweet spot' with getting involved in them. The risks of jumping in too early are obvious – you risk burning yourself out on a title before it becomes feature complete – but equally I find myself becoming anxious about buying a product too late and finding myself joining a community that's either past its peak, or else has been so involved with the development process for a game that they understand it on a deeper level than I could ever hope to achieve. With *DayZ*, for example, there is not only a large community that has developed a deep understanding of the fundamental logic of the game, but there is also a risk that its slow development means that when it finally reaches version 1.0 that there might not be any interest left.

Will the fanfare of a 1.0 release be enough to resurrect the hype of a game that showed promise in its alpha stages, or are many of these early-access games peaking in



www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

popularity months or years before their final release? Personally, I'm optimistic that there are enough players out there like me who want to wait for the complete experience, but equally I'm still worried that with many of these games I'm going to find myself jumping onto an empty bandwagon.
Jon Porter

It's still early days for early access, but put it this way: it didn't do *Minecraft* too much harm, did it? At least your new Atlas headset is already feature complete.

High street lowlifes

So Activision's Eric Hirshberg says preorders are down across the industry. I'm not surprised in the slightest, but I don't think he sees the whole picture. He says it's because we are increasingly buying games digitally and that boxed products are so widely available that there's no need to guarantee yourself a copy. He's missing a trick, I think.

The experience of buying a game from a shop is horrid. If you're not having your purchase mocked, you're being upsold some own-brand tat or pestered to sign up for some loyalty scheme or other by some (understandably) desperate member of staff. Videogame retail has always been bad, admittedly, but now I have other options – not just from digital downloads, but online stores like Amazon too – I find myself only going to a high street shop when I've got something to trade in.

Retailers and publishers need each other, and in their rush to help each other out in these difficult times they've lost sight of the fact that their first priority should be the customer. The current trend seems to be for retailer-exclusive content that's tied to preorders. I assume you saw that JPG of all the *Watch Dogs* special editions that were available from retailers around the world. I get what's going on: it enables the publisher to make the retailer feel special for getting stuff no one else is getting, then lets the retailer offer the customer something they can't get anywhere else.

The thing is, by its very design, this stuff can't be special at all. Something that's being made for only a fraction of a developer's entire audience is bound to be superficial. An alternate costume, a weapon skin, maybe an XP boost – it's all nonsense, really, and getting it doesn't make me feel special, it makes me feel like a mug for falling for it. Hirshberg can blame market forces all he likes, but perhaps he should get his own house in order before passing the buck to the world at large.
Justin Linham

Was there ever really an incentive to put your name down early? The last game we remember being in short supply on day one was *Resident Evil 4*. Still, if it means we can one day look forward to having to endure one fewer upsell at the till, we're all for it.

Fear of a wack planet

I was delighted to see *No Man's Sky* on the cover of **E**270, but I noticed that some others weren't. Looking online I saw a host of complaints about Hello Games' latest being a load of indie rubbish that couldn't possibly live up to the enormous amount of hype that it has generated. The latter could, with respect, be said about any in-development game that has ever featured in the magazine. It's the former statement that really makes my blood boil, though.

Why are people so intimidated by indie games? They seem to think their precious hobby is somehow under threat, that the existence and success of games like *Fez* and *Gone Home* means that the likes of *Battlefield* and *GTA* will no longer exist, that EA and Rockstar will start making walking simulators and pixel-art puzzle-platformers. I just don't get it. Ubisoft is making smaller games like *Child Of Light* and *Valiant Hearts*, but it's still making an *Assassin's Creed* every year like clockwork and investing in new things like *Watch Dogs*.

I love a lavish blockbuster just as much as the next man, but I've also fallen head over heels in love with a lot of games made by small studios, in the past couple of years especially. Surely all that matters is a game's quality, and not how much it cost to make?
Jonathan Baker

Well, you'd think so. It's difficult to imagine most traditional game companies investing in something as ambitious and risky as *No Man's Sky*, but for as long as the little guys keep pushing at the limits of games, we'll keep celebrating them in these pages.

Price climbers

I'm seriously beginning to wonder why we in the UK have to pay the price so that US gamers can get a better deal, though I know that this problem is not limited to gaming and extends to various products. I do believe that we are being let down as consumers in the pricing department. I understand costs regarding shipping have to be factored in, but as I have some knowledge of the cost of import/export I do not believe that the price difference is warranted. A UK game can cost £50 to £55, which is $85 to $90, but US gamers pay a mere $60, which is equivalent to £35. This is an astronomical difference. I do not believe that our US cousins would ever accept this, but as usual we here in the UK allow it to go on. I love the medium, but I feel that people are missing out on worthy titles because of their expense, and publishers are missing out on income by not making games more affordable. I believe something will have to give eventually.
Adnan El

It already has, with the death of the middle tier. It's an age-old problem, and there's always VAT to consider, but that doesn't account for, let alone justify, such a large difference. Apparently US store accounts are easy to create and offer games at cheaper rates, although clearly we could never condone pursuing such avenues. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Asked to draw something under the rubric "FEAR", I sketch a fanged dragon's head. For "WEALTH", I draw a sack with a dollar sign on the side. When it comes to "AFTERLIFE", for some reason, I pen a smiley face with a neurotically toothy grin. This process is the opening of David OReilly's arthouse provocation *Mountain* rather than that of the remarkable mobile game *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, but it suits the latter just as well. After all, that game is predicated on fear (of not being noticed) and the pursuit of wealth at all costs, and its attitude to cosmic existential questions such as the existence of an afterlife is, one may surmise, that of a rabbit-frozen-in-headlights, porcelain-veneers-flashing rictus of nervous incomprehension.

Was any videogame ever so thoroughly both a semi-satirical symptom of and a willing collaborator in cultural decline as *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*? Right from the initial loading-screen tips, the game recommends to its users a psychopathically instrumental approach to social interaction. The only reason to date people is to "level up". The only reason to be charming is to get "the best opportunities and rewards". The only reason to talk to people – at least to people you don't want to have sex with – is for "networking". Forget being nice, the game whispers evilly in the player's ear, this is how you really get ahead.

The truth of these rules is then demonstrated in a world of peculiarly Botoxed ultramodern design, in which everything is shiny and clean, and green bricks of dollars literally spurt out of the body of Kim Kardashian when you talk to her. (It is as though she is actually able to defecate cash, as well as metallic silver stars, from every pore, let alone every orifice.)

The scenario is hilariously illogical, mainly in the way that the life of reality TV stars is itself hilariously illogical. At the beginning of the game, I have a job folding clothes in a boutique and I travel around the city by bus, but I somehow manage to live in a building that's called "deLUXE lifestyle Apartments". (My pad is the sort of apartment where you would leave *Mountain* running on a spare iPad as a kind of dynamic installation piece.)

Forget being nice, the game whispers evilly in the player's ear, this is how you really get ahead

Luckily, Kim Kardashian happens by, and invites me to a party to save me from this lifestyle. It is a terrible party, because the only people there are Kim Kardashian, the barman, and a woman with whom I can choose to flirt or network. (Reader, I did the obvious.) Even so, it is not long before I have acquired a manager and publicist. Why? What is it exactly that I do? Don't be silly. What I do is try to be famous.

This game is, of course, too clever to be totally straight-faced, and many characters are given snarky lines that appear to be undermining the celebrity ethos of the whole. (My publicist makes a surprisingly dark implicit admission: "Who needs therapy when blasting someone online makes me feel better than all the CBT and SSRIs in the world could?") The game, then, may be trying to work for two audiences at once. Just as great children's movies always contain jokes that pass over the kids' heads but amuse the adults, perhaps *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* is making a pitch to appeal to hipster sceptics as well as true, adoring Kardashian fans.

If so, it's an audacious gambit. And it's true that *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* may be seen charitably, in one light, as a Machiavellian/Darwinian self-help survival guide for navigating a decadent society in which all other actors are competing ruthlessly for cash and attention. Yet it also cannot help but endorse the values it is portraying, despite allowing some characters to verbally undercut them – never more so than on the excessively frequent occasions when it attempts to trick you into advertising the game for it on Twitter or Facebook, or begs you to spend your own real money on in-app currency so that you can buy a new hairstyle or shirt. It works, of course – at the time of writing, *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* is forecast to gross $200 million by the end of the year – but it also shows you where the game's fundamental sympathies really lie.

In the end, then, *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* is a powerful demonstration that, sometimes, you can't have it both ways. But what if there were a version scripted by the author of American Psycho and Glamorama? *Bret Easton Ellis: Hollywood* – now that really would be something.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

Illustration **marshdavies.com**



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IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

The first scene in the original *The Legend Of Zelda* is one of the best moments in videogames. Not the first moment of gameplay, when Link faces the wiles of monster-infested Hyrule alone unless he descends into the Old Man's cave to retrieve a sword; no, I mean the title sequence. The rocky mountain cut through by an aqua blue waterfall; the sky, an improbable orange; the title itself, with glowing Triforce backdrop – a thing that yet means nothing to us. Two bars of plaintive music, repeated, and then a fade through blue to black.

Seconds later, everything's ruined. Scrolling text tells us of Gannon and Zelda and the Triforce, a tale so straightforward that it doesn't even rise to the level of myth. *The Legend Of Zelda* is pure mechanics: go find the treasure and save the princess.

Despite the fact the *Zelda* intro offers no interaction apart from the ability to press Start to skip it, it sets a tone and mood better than the rest of the game ever manages. Yes, the dungeons feel murky and threatening at times. The cool colours of their walls and floors alongside the brooding musical runs evoke a damp, wet foreboding, even despite the game's 8bit fidelity. But nothing quite matches that title sequence.

The reason is simple, and it's one of the commonest techniques in almost every other kind of art, but rarely in games: ambiguity.

In those first few seconds of *The Legend Of Zelda*, anything is possible. Your mind can't help but fill in the possibilities. You're confronted with a strange world, alien but familiar, with a secret of some kind. But then the game gives away all its secrets right up front. The folkloric backstory is told in as bland a manner as possible. While everything the game asks of you as a player is still left to be discovered, everything that it means to ask for those actions is laid bare, and before you've even pressed Start.

Admittedly, the original *Zelda* is almost 30 years old. But today's games – generally thought to have matured narratively – still supply more direct information than we'd expect from a film, novel or painting. *The Last Of Us*, a blockbuster game that aspires toward meaningful, adult discourse, spells out every detail of its context through verbal exposition. The game doesn't trust you enough to allow any interpretive freedom.



Illustration **marshdavies.com**

Counterintuitively, more meaning is conveyed by withholding information than supplying it

It's too late for *Zelda*, a game that functioned as a children's story because, frankly, it was first made for children. But we can still imagine a version of the game that makes good on the promise set by those first few moments. The obvious approach would involve equivocating on the goodness of good and the wickedness of evil – is Gannon really merciless and execrable, a simple allegorical emblem? Indeed, this is *Braid*'s approach to reinventing the platformer as fine art. Or likewise, what if Link's own resolve to accomplish such an improbable task as saving Hyrule single-handedly were unclear? There are already moments of loneliness and despair in *The Legend Of Zelda* – crossing the desert always feels particularly dour – but these moments are left unamplified.

Some of the more successful indie and artistic games have learned this lesson. There, greater meaning arises through ambiguity rather than through overtness. *Journey* offers one example. By removing all language and replacing it with iconography and player gesture, the game profoundly magnifies its sensory, affective, and interpretive possibilities. And despite sometimes turgid textual interludes, *Braid* never directly interprets the 'correct' meaning of its game-mechanical, time-manipulation allegories. Counterintuitively, more meaning is conveyed by withholding information than supplying it.

But those are indie games. One might wonder if such a strategy could work for mainstream games. As it happens, an example of ambiguity can be found at the very centre of one of the most successful videogame series of all time: *The Sims*. The most fundamental question in a simulation of human behavior – what a character is thinking and feeling – is abstracted to the point of nonsense. Instead of voiceovers or hackneyed dialogue, we get abstractions: icons and grunts. Yet this technique makes us more attached to our Sims, precisely because we become involved in deciphering their desires and motivations. As in the *Zelda* intro, that work takes place in players' heads rather than in their hands. As it turns out, the oldest kind of interactivity – interpretation – is often the most powerful.

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

The web may be rapidly descending into a morass of BuzzFeed-inspired quizzes and virally headlined image galleries, but much of the game media, and its news desks in particular, continue to work to tradition. News coverage is played with a straight bat and to a rigidly defined template. First comes the news itself, based on a press release or another website's original reporting. This does the greatest service to your readers, letting them know what's happening and where they can go to read more about it. It's also by far the quickest to produce. It won't, however, get much traffic; other people's news never does. You need to follow up.

At the opposite end of the scale is a considered, balanced report with input from multiple sources. These might be the most satisfying to read, but they take a relative age to pull together. PRs tend to go into lockdown when a story breaks – if it's bad news, they want nothing to do with it; if it's their own announcement, they'd rather let the press release speak for itself – so you may struggle to get the access you need. That just won't do when you're on a 20-minute deadline. In an era when news cycles move at such lightning pace, your audience is three or four scandals ahead of you by the time you're ready to go. And how do you produce an eye-catching headline for a story that goes out of its way to be even-handed? Twenty-two Amazing Industry Reactions To Videogame Drama X (Number 17 Will Make You Cry)?

Little wonder, then, that the most common follow-up to a major story is the opinion piece. While not quite so quick to produce as a PR rewrite, all you need is a single source – your own brain – and the ability to express a viewpoint in enough ways to fill a word count. The headline practically writes itself, you hit your deadline with time to spare, and the clicks and comments roll in.

I've written plenty of such pieces in my time, and I've never felt entirely comfortable doing them. As my mouse cursor hovered over the Publish button, I would hesitate, wondering if I was about to make a quite profound arse out of myself. I'd be torn apart in the comments, I thought. I'd forever be known as the guy who thought Wrongheaded Thing X about Industry Development Y.



Which is going to get more traffic, the piece that's even-handed and nails it, or the patronising, one-eyed one?

And then I realised it doesn't matter in the slightest. In fact, given how the Internet works, it might even be better to be wrong. It's why BuzzFeed and its ilk are so fond of image galleries, and why their headlines point to a single image that falls roughly two-thirds of the way through the set.

Advertising remains online media's principal source of revenue, and it is still most commonly sold on pageviews. The more clicks your website gets, the greater your ad revenue. Now, which is going to get more traffic, the piece that's thoughtful, even-handed and nails it, or the patronising, one-eyed and factually inaccurate one that's guaranteed to get readers frothing below the line and on social media? There is no distinction between good and bad clicks for the ad men, no metric to differentiate between the reader who leaves happy and the one who departs in abject fury. All that matters is that views are expressed in a browser window, share buttons get clicked, and comments are posted. Take whichever side of the argument you want, just so long as you take a side, and take it quickly.

I'm not saying that writers are going out of their way to be wrong. I'm not sure how I'd get out of bed in the morning if I thought that was the case. But there has never been so much scrutiny on how the videogame press does its job, and with every individual error of judgement, our collective stock falls that much further. We are among the few privileged enough to have a platform for our views. And it's vital that privilege isn't abused for the sake of making a few more quid off the advertisers.

I appreciate the irony in using a monthly column to call out op-eds. I realise, too, that the opinion piece predates the Internet by decades, and that there was a time when print media was considered too speedy. In 1858, The New York Times said communiqués by telegraph were "superficial, sudden, unsifted, too fast for the truth". Perhaps it's not a question of pace, then, but priorities. A writer's first obligation isn't to analytics or advertisers, after all, but to readers. Stop giving our audience reasons to trust us and soon enough we'll all be pumping out 30-page galleries titled Which *Mario Kart 8* Character Are You? And then I really will struggle to get up in the mornings.

*Nathan Brown is **Edge**'s games editor, and you just won't believe what he writes in **E**272. It will blow your mind*

Illustration **marshdavies.com**

#271

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

The girl issue

www.edge-online.com
Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

She should be offensive. The star of *Bayonetta 2* (p36) takes the phrase 'hypersexualised' to ludicrous new heights: she sashays about the place with a physically implausible wiggle, and strips down to nothing more than her high heels at the end of a combo. The cutscene camera is obsessed with the curve of her buttocks and her provocative sucks on an endless supply of lollipops. *Bayonetta 2* should be gross.

Instead she might just be the strongest female lead in games, comfortable in her skin and her sex, proving herself the most powerful being on the planet and all its spectral planes. She does not exist to be ogled: during combat, it's all but impossible to anyway, since her naked form is typically obscured by the gigantic hell-demon she's just summoned for the sole purpose of chomping a god into oblivion.

Also coming soon to Wii U, *Hyrule Warriors* (p48) may be wedded enough to tradition to make sure you start the game playing as Link, but the character-select screen features more female fighters than male ones by the end of our time with it. It shows that, in fact, this most storied of series has long been about more than just the boy with the sword, and it says much that sticking to tradition and playing as Link proves the least interesting way to play the game.

And heartening as it is to see Japan begin to cast off the shackles of 30 years of abysmally lascivious character designs – although *Dead Or Alive 5 Ultimate*'s Bath And Bedtime DLC shows it still has a way left to go – the western game industry also has woman trouble. With the big boys such as Ubisoft continuing to get it wrong, it's up to the indies to show the way. The developers of *Virginia* (p50) might name check the likes of Twin Peaks and The X Files, but here the women are the stars, not sidekicks or murder victims. These games may still be the exception rather than the rule, but they suggest that this most blokey of industries may finally be getting somewhere.

MOST WANTED

Scalebound Xbox One
Platinum has a lot more talent on its books than just Hideki Kamiya, but he's still the headline act. *The Wonderful 101* was let down by its focus on Wii U's GamePad; Xbox One's more traditional controls should mean *Scalebound* is a reminder of what Kamiya is capable of.

Alien: Isolation 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Time alone with sci-fi's most horrifying ET is an odd wish to express, but *Isolation*'s AI xenomorph promises something all the procedurally generated jump scares in the world can't: a coherent threat. Creeping dread is a rare commodity in games, but it's the only way to pay homage to Scott's abused 1979 classic.

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End PS4
The departures of Amy Hennig and others may have raised eyebrows, but *Uncharted*'s in safe hands. *The Last Of Us* leads Druckmann and Straley should give Drake the PS4 debut he deserves.



BAYONETTA 2

It's nearly witch time, and Platinum's Wii U sequel is in dazzlingly good shape

Publisher Nintendo
Developer PlatinumGames
Format Wii U
Origin Japan
Release Sept 20 (JP), Oct (EU, NA)

The opening minutes of *Bayonetta 2* evoke the same sense of nostalgia-tinged familiarity as *Halo: Anniversary*. Platinum's sequel looks just like *Bayonetta* did in your memory: ferociously colourful, minutely detailed, and pin sharp. But load up even the HD version of the first game – which will come bundled with *Bayonetta 2* when it's released, though whether digitally or on a physical disc depends on edition – and you'll find it muddy and washed-out in comparison.

Bayonetta 2 represents an astounding visual feat, then. Battles come saturated in magic effects and bloom, while enemies – who now react differently depending which attack you clobber them with – are adorned with even more decorative flourishes than before. And while Platinum won't be drawn on a final resolution, the game glides along at an effortless 60fps.

"When we were designing the look of *Bayonetta 2*, we wanted people to be able to tell the first and second games apart with just a glance," director **Yusuke Hashimoto** tells us. "This isn't just through the colour palette, but also the character design and the way characters move, the setting, and many other facets of the game."

Which explains why Bayonetta herself has had a makeover, ditching her long hairdo and warm red accent colour for a short crop and cooler blue accessories to match the game's 'water' theme. This is matched with a more stylised look, trading many of her exaggerated curves for straighter lines and angles, though not when it comes to T&A, obviously.

The game's world, meanwhile, feels simultaneously familiar and fresh. The art team travelled around Europe for architectural inspiration, taking in Bruges, Florence and Venice. "In Japan, there are places that try to imitate European style by selling pre-aged, multicoloured bricks," lead environmental artist **Hiroki Onishi** writes in a blog post on Platinum's website. "But after going to Italy, it terrifies me that Japanese people probably don't understand how different the real thing is." *Bayonetta 2*'s environments are heavily stylised, but this research shows in its cobbled roads, ageing tiled roofs, stained glass windows and expansive waterways.

It isn't just the visuals that have been scaled up. When the game was revealed, Platinum said it wanted players to feel like they were fighting *Bayonetta*'s final boss from the off. And while this sequel eases you in a little more gently than that, the spectacle of even early encounters is breathtaking. The explosive action of last year's E3 demo – which pitted Bayonetta against all manner of angels atop the back of a jet aircraft as it ▶



Producer Akiko Kuroda

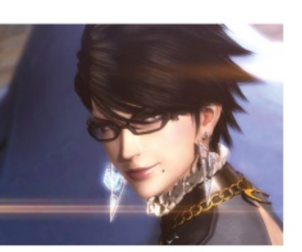


This angel is called Valiance, and is one of the game's more powerful enemies, functioning as a miniboss



Each of Bayonetta's new guns has a different coloured charm and embedded jewel to differentiate it, although all are cased in rich blue and gold





Bayonetta possessed the curious air of an '80s Hollywood secretary in the first game, and her new haircut only serves to heighten that association

thundered around skyscrapers and azure skies – is matched in the three playable levels we see, especially during a fight with a Lumen Sage that takes place as Infernal Demons do battle in the background.

Bayonetta's moveset has been ramped up as well. Wicked Weaves return – despite her new pixie cut – as do Torture Attacks and Witch Time, all functioning as you'd expect. But now when you double jump, your wings will stay extended until you float all the way back down to the ground. And if you double-tap dodge during the new underwater sections, Bayonetta will turn into a sea snake (you'll still morph into a panther if you input the command on dry land), allowing her to traverse the game's large areas more quickly than she ever could in human form. The Umbra Witch will also be able to augment her abilities by hopping into a powerful mech at various points throughout the game.

"We often consulted Mr Kamiya to make sure we were staying true to Bayonetta"

The biggest addition of all is Umbran Climax. Fill your magic gauge – which is still used to unleash Torture Attacks – and you can squeeze L to summon a succession of Wicked Weave and Infernal Demon attacks, covering a huge area. Purists worried that this will make the game less about skill or, worse, disrupt the flow of *Bayonetta*'s finely balanced combat should be able to take solace in Hashimoto's insistence that the team has thought carefully about its inclusion.

"We kept in mind everything we learned from the first game when balancing the combos in the sequel," he says. "It took a considerable amount of time, to say the least! [The Umbran Climax] system presents the player with a choice: will I utilise magic to perform a Torture Attack and concentrate on a single enemy, or will I spread my attacks over a group using Umbran Climax? Knowing when to use which adds an interesting layer to gameplay strategy."

Despite currently being tied up with Xbox One exclusive *Scalebound*, the series' original creator, Hideki Kamiya, was heavily involved in the design stages of *Bayonetta 2*, too.

"We often consulted Mr Kamiya to make sure we were staying true to *Bayonetta*, including the design of the main characters," Hashimoto says. "We received input on the scenario from many people, both in and outside of the company, but ultimately Kamiya was in control of putting the script and story together."

The move to Wii U also raised questions, specifically over whether such a fast-moving, reactions-based game could work as well on Nintendo's broad GamePad as it did on 360's famed controller. *Bayonetta* feels surprisingly intuitive on the tablet-like device, however, both responsive and fluid. Muscle memory still returns more easily with a Pro Controller, but we were able to achieve Pure Platinum results after only a couple of warm-up fights.

"At PlatinumGames, when you are deciding how to best make use of a controller, you start by asking what kind of game you want the player to experience," Hashimoto explains. "*Bayonetta 2* is an action game, so our number one priority was the feel of the game's controls. Shifting to Wii U didn't change this, so we didn't alter the core control scheme for GamePad."

Despite the successful translation, it's impossible not to wonder whether Wii U was really the best choice of platform for a *Bayonetta* sequel, given its subject matter. "From our perspective as the developer, we didn't so much choose Wii U as Nintendo stepped up and chose us, which *allowed* us to develop *Bayonetta 2*," Hashimoto says. "In other words, without Nintendo, *Bayonetta 2* couldn't exist. As a platform, Wii U has many titles that appeal to players of all ages and skills, and we're hoping a game like *Bayonetta*, which appeals to a specific demographic, will stand out as a result."

Platinum has also provided a touch control option, which lets you tap on enemies to attack them, swipe the screen to evade attacks, and guide Bayonetta's movement with a pointer. "The GamePad is part of what makes Wii U special," Hashimoto says, "so we tailored two experiences to GamePad that make it easier for anyone to enjoy ▶



Wicked threads

While the included version of *Bayonetta* is a port of the 360 version, Platinum has added Nintendo-inspired flourishes. Bayonetta can step out of her black outfit and into the famous duds of Samus, Link or Princess Peach instead, each with their own gimmicks. Play dressed as Link, for example, and you'll hear familiar *Zelda* jingles as you open chests and doors, and collect rupees rather than halos. The Samus costume, meanwhile, allows you to raise and lower your visor by holding the taunt button. Best of all is the ability to summon Bowser as a Wicked Weave when dressed up as Peach.

"I often get asked if the costumes announced for the first game will make an appearance in the sequel," producer **Akiko Kuroda** says. "Let me just say we will do everything we can to live up to the expectations of our fans. We're preparing new content for *Bayonetta 2* as well, so please look forward to further announcements!"



TOP LEFT **This giant metallic manta ray belches missiles from the skull marking on its belly in a section that is hugely evocative of *Rez*.** RIGHT **This angel resembles the first game's Temperantia boss, albeit with legs. There are several variants on the creature throughout *Bayonetta 2*, each with different arm attachments**

TOP RIGHT **A full magic bar allows you to unleash an Umbran Climax, a flurry of violence that will destroy any enemies in your vicinity.** ABOVE **The white-haired boy is called Loki, and resides in Purgatorio, one of the three realms in *Bayonetta*'s universe. Ronan, meanwhile, tends The Gates Of Hell pub.** MAIN **Bayonetta's encounters usually spill out across large areas, not least when she throws in surfing, flying or hopping lithely across chunks of falling masonry**



Bayonetta – the intuitive touchscreen controls and off-TV play. These aren't settings hidden in a submenu; you can switch in realtime whenever you want. Just take out your stylus and start tapping."

While 'off-TV play' – which simply means playing solely on your GamePad's screen – is certainly welcome, the touchscreen controls might sound like anathema to seasoned *Bayonetta* players. Yet they're undeniably effective, providing an on-ramp for those yet to learn all the button combos. And because they're always on, not a selectable mode, it proves little hassle to graduate from one control scheme to the other.

But perhaps the best way to learn is by watching a master, and *Bayonetta 2*'s new online co-op mode, Tag Climax, provides that opportunity. The mode is structured around unlockable Verse Cards, which you flip over to progress to the next stage. There's a competitive streak, too, with players ranked on their performances. You'll be able to wager the halos you earn from fighting – reaping more if you select a harder difficulty – and if you're the best player, you'll walk away with an even greater sum to spend on new moves, weapons and accessories in the singleplayer game, which can then in turn be used in your next online session. There will also be a selection of playable co-op characters to choose from, including Jeanne, Bayonetta's former rival, who returns as an ally during angel battles in the singleplayer campaign.

"To mix things up, in Tag Climax you can play with characters besides Bayonetta and Jeanne," Hashimoto says. "We put a lot of work into making this mode something special, so I hope people experiment with all the different characters and have fun playing online together."

Further broadening the sequel's combat options, there are more weapons to choose from this time around. We quickly gravitated to the Kafka – a bow that shoots poisonous arrows – during boss fights. Other options include the Chernobog, a giant triple-bladed scythe with a built-in rifle, and a pair of katana blades called the Rakshasa.

"We wanted to design weapon types that weren't available in the first game and had personality to them," Hashimoto explains. "*Bayonetta* is the kind of action game where just holding down a button will evolve an attack – for example, holding the punch button will allow Bayonetta to start shooting after a performing a punch. In *Bayonetta 2*, we wanted to expand on this idea in a way that would showcase the unique features of each weapon. So with the whip, you can thrash the enemy with lashes, but by holding down the button, it's now possible to grab the enemy and slam them to the ground."

The included HD update of the original game features its own additions, too, in the form of new costumes (see 'Wicked threads') and a retrofitting of *Bayonetta 2*'s touchscreen controls. You'll also be able to use the GamePad gyro in some stages, which should fit rather well with chapter IV's *Space Harrier*-inspired missile ride. It's a thorough overhaul, but *Bayonetta* wasn't a planned inclusion right from the beginning of the project. "We made the decision soon after *Bayonetta 2* became a Wii U exclusive," producer **Akiko Kuroda** tells us. "Considering that it has been five years since the first game, and the sequel is being released on new hardware, we figured there are people interested in *Bayonetta 2* who have never had a chance to play the original. We felt that bringing *Bayonetta* to the Wii U would be the best way to introduce these people to the series."

Bayonetta 2's greatest success is making hands old and new feel instantly at home

For all the additions, *Bayonetta 2*'s greatest success is making hands old and new feel instantly at home. It feels as revelatory to pick up and play as the first game did back in 2010, and it's difficult not to be left breathless by the rush of colour, detail and spectacle. Whether it finds the audience on Wii U to justify a *Bayonetta 3* seems less important in the face of the sheer confidence of the series' hop to a new platform, but – irrespective of the genre's perceived high entry requirements – Platinum's latest feels powerful enough to bewitch a legion of fans all over again. ■

Q&A

Yusuke Hashimoto

Director, Platinum



How does it feel to be bringing mature themes to Nintendo hardware? Do you think *Bayonetta 2* sits comfortably in Wii U's lineup?
I think it is great that Wii U owners get to enjoy a variety of genres. I am glad we can help expand the console's reach, and change the perception of what it is capable of.

Apart from the main character, what did you consider the most important parts of the first game to bring across to this sequel?
We strived to make sure that both games feel like they take place in the same universe. So while the returning cast retain their distinctive personalities, we gave them all a new design. Nearly all the enemies are new as well. So, although *Bayonetta 2* is a sequel, we almost think you could play it as a standalone title.

Part of the game will see Bayonetta in a mech – how does that work in the context of her moveset?
The mech preserves the classic *Bayonetta* gameplay of gun, punch and kick combos, but with amplified power that will send enemies flying. It can also fly, which opened up a lot of other ideas for some really thrilling battles. As for any other vehicles, I'll leave that up to your imagination.

It seems like there are fewer action games being made in Japan nowadays, at least from a western perspective, but how do you feel about the Japanese development scene in general right now, and how do you think it will evolve over the next few years?
I cannot speak as the entire Japanese gaming industry, but I will say that I do not see the declining number of action games as a problem, but as an opportunity. Action games are our speciality and passion; I know there are still many people out there who love action games as much as we do.

If you had to summarise Platinum's style of game development, how would you describe it?
We are constantly looking to challenge ourselves. It's hard to speak objectively, since I am so close to the project, but I feel the new touch controls and online co-op with Tag Climax in *Bayonetta 2* are a direct result of this approach. We always strive to try new things.



RIGHT **The Masked Lumen is Bayonetta's main rival, searching for her in order to kill her. When the pair meet for the first time, the battle is spectacular, their summoned angels and demons scrapping in the background while they duel**

CENTRE **This enemy type is known as an Accolade, a heavily armoured centaur-like creature that wields a spear-tipped sceptre. They look more fearsome than they really are, however, and can be dispatched without much trouble**

Design showcase

Bayonetta's vibrant world gets grander and more deadly in this colour-rich sequel

ABOVE **Jeanne was an antagonist in the first game, but features as an ally during angel battles in the sequel. At one point, a botched demon summon drags Jeanne to the hellish world of Inferno, sparking off a rescue mission**

ABOVE **Bayonetta's new outfit sports a dramatic feather arrangement in place of the long, flowing hair she once had. The effect is different in motion, accentuating her graceful movements**

RIGHT **Loki may be young, but he's a capable fighter (even if his English accent isn't so accomplished). He wields a form of blue magic and a pack of throwing cards, and accompanies you for the majority of the game**



EVOLVE

Is this the next stage of the asymmetric multiplayer shooter, or just a cul-de-sac?

Publisher 2K
Developer Turtle Rock Studios
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release February

Despite its off-kilter gait, asymmetric multiplayer is gathering momentum. The past holds many notable pioneers in the field – not least *Alien Vs Predator* and *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*'s Spies Vs Mercs mode – but it's only recently that such design philosophy has graduated from side note to industry buzzphrase. And Turtle Rock Studios' *Evolve*, with its giant-monster-versus-four-person-team setup, might just have the most asymmetric multiplayer yet.

But while disparity is at the core of *Evolve*'s design, that only means Turtle Rock Studios' squad shooter represents an even more intricate balancing act. This is a game built around a succession of fortune reversals that, fascinatingly, see the balance of power change drastically across a match without denying the possibility of victory for either side. It's a game that rewards planning and bravery in equal measure, but one that punishes foolhardiness with alarming speed.

The pronounced physiological and numerical differences between the two sides undoubtedly contribute to making *Evolve* feel like a fresh proposition, but equally refreshing is the extent to which human players must work together as a team to succeed. Attempt to lone-wolf your way to victory as a hunter and at best you'll struggle to keep pace with the fast-moving monster; at worst you'll find yourself isolated and the sole focus of its wrath. There's aggressive flora and fauna to worry about too, including giant plants that snap shut around you and stocky quadrupeds that resemble rocks until you wander too close to them and get mauled. Without the aid of other party members, missteps like these are invariably fatal.

A good set of squadmates can make all the difference, then, and Turtle Rock has been showing off the second set of four hunters since E3, with four more still to be revealed. Of the newcomers, Hyde, a burly Assault class gunner, is the most traditional. His powerful minigun can mete out a great deal of damage from range, and he can switch to a devastating flamethrower to deal with close-up threats. Hyde also carries toxic grenades that can be used to flush monsters from their hiding places as well as a personal shield that grants him temporary invulnerability. This selection of tools makes him formidable, but also results in him being the simplest and least involved class to play. You need to stay close to your group to avoid being eaten, sure, but little interaction is necessary in combat.

The Support class is filled by Bucket this time around, a stocky robot capable of detaching his head, which then becomes a fast-moving UAV. Once in the air, you can ▶



The Lazarus Device must be equipped as a secondary weapon, charged up and fired to bring back the fallen



The Kraken is more menacing than Goliath in its fully evolved form, but remains unsettling even in its early stages thanks to its gruesome physiology



For the hunters, matches begin in a dropship and they parachute into the level. The monster, meanwhile, begins where the ship's landing flare hits and must run away before the humans arrive

quickly search the area and tag the monster with a tracking dart, assuming you can hold it steady in your reticle for a few seconds. Once tagged, every player will be able to see the beast's position. Bucket has other tricks, too, able to deploy up to five automated sentry guns to hector the creature and coming with a cache of laser-guided missiles for when he gets within range. Finally, he can cloak the entire team for a time (assuming everybody's close by) to enable them to sneak in close.

Lazarus, our Medic for today, has a cloaking device as well, albeit a less altruistic one, but his skills as a medic leave something to be desired. He can fire out a healing burst to patch up a modest portion of the health bar of anyone stood around him, but it will take a fair few hits to nurse a seriously injured ally back to full health. He does, however, carry a Lazarus Device, which can revive his dead teammates just so long as you can reach them

The best part? Hits will create weak spots on the creature for your teammates to pummel

before the timer expires. This results in the rather macabre need to stand over dying comrades, willing them to slip away before bringing them back to life with a jolt. (If a player does die before you can resurrect them, they'll simply have to wait a few minutes in the dropship before parachuting back into the level.) Lazarus makes up for his shortcomings as a doctor by toting around a sniper rifle, the range of which feels hugely empowering. The best part? Hits will create weak spots on the creature for your teammates to pummel.

Finally, the Trapper class – *Evolve*'s most bespoke role definition – is occupied by two individuals in our playthrough: Maggie, the actual trapper, and Daisy, a sort of hulking bloodhound that sniffs out the monster, tries to get the team's attention when she picks up the scent, and will even revive fallen hunters. Along with a basic machine gun, Maggie has access to harpoon traps – these, as the name suggests, hold the monster in place and force it to destroy its restraints before it can move on – as well as the essential mobile arena, which keeps your quarry within firing range for a few precious minutes.

The hunter squad is only so well equipped because of its competition, however, and balancing out the bestial side of the equation is the Kraken. A dark-blue tentacled creature, it's more Alien than the King Kong-esque Goliath we played last time. The Kraken can still climb surfaces quickly, but is able to fly, leaping into the air and zipping from point to point using its air burst ability. The creature is less intuitive to control than the ground-based Goliath, but its blend of anti-personnel mines, lightning strikes and squad-scattering vortex weapon make it a terrifying presence.

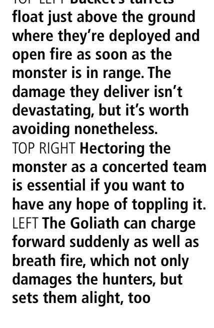
Taking flight automatically sets your altitude, and while you're able to move up and down to some degree, it's far from the graceful swooping manoeuvre you'd hope for. We experienced some bugs in the build we played, too, which slowed our creature down to glider speeds; even when the flight system appeared to be working OK, though, we found ourselves battling through syrup rather than barrelling through the air. And due to the tiny size of your opponents relative to you, combined with their robust shielding, the sense of impact when you collar a hunter up close is lacking. It's difficult to see the result of your lunge, and your target will most likely be up on their feet again shortly afterwards. The Kraken is best played as a sniper, we're told, and its ranged attacks are considerably more satisfying. But when you're trapped in a mobile arena with few places to hide, panicked melee attacks are often your main recourse.

Perhaps that's the point. Playing as the monster is genuinely tense as you transition, through feeding on carrion, from weak quarry to sizeable aggressor. And, control niggles aside, *Evolve* is an intoxicating concept that Turtle Rock is well placed to deliver on, given its experience with *Left 4 Dead*. But while the short matches are involved, multilayered affairs, the highly specific nature of *Evolve*'s hunt threatens to sap the game of the depth and variety it needs to endure. We've only seen one mode so far, and while others are promised, nothing has yet made it clear how the attractive novelty of the setup will mutate into a shooter with real staying power. ■

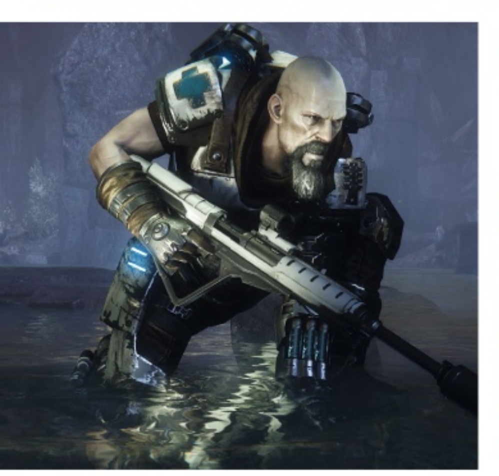


Dam busters

The level we see, called The Dam, features the titular structure at one end and a series of winding cliff paths and tunnels on each side of a central river. The caves are teeming with life, including some huge creatures that function almost as mini-bosses if hunters choose to engage them. Do so, and you'll be offering the player controlling the monster a free meal, however. And that's a bad plan, since the monster is aiming to advance through three stages by feeding – with each new form upgrading its attacks, but the process of growing leaving it vulnerable for a short period – before attacking a generator at the top of the dam. The generator can only be damaged by melee hits and the creature can only land those when not under fire, making the finale a tense scramble for survival no matter which side you're on.



TOP LEFT **Bucket's turrets float just above the ground where they're deployed and open fire as soon as the monster is in range. The damage they deliver isn't devastating, but it's worth avoiding nonetheless.**
TOP RIGHT **Hectoring the monster as a concerted team is essential if you want to have any hope of toppling it.**
LEFT **The Goliath can charge forward suddenly as well as breath fire, which not only damages the hunters, but sets them alight, too**





FAR LEFT **Lazarus is suited to ranged combat, combining his cloaking device and sniper rifle to become an effective nuisance from afar.**
LEFT **Some of the indigenous creatures lurking in maps are as big as the beasts you're hunting, and can prove troublesome if not avoided**



Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Reflections), Ivory Tower
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin France, UK
Release November 11







THE CREW

Ubisoft's open-world racer spins out in a painful beta

The Crew is a racing MMOG that pulls in such disparate elements as *Watch Dogs'* cellphone UI, *Assassin's Creed*'s unfolding map and *Far Cry 2*'s health system. It has a thousand pop-up challenges on an open-world map so densely covered with objectives and missions that few players will ever see it all, and it features a po-faced story that's faultlessly earnest even in the face of the most predictable caricatures and stereotypes in all of videogames. It's a tentpole Ubisoft game, all right.

But while all those familiar faces may not seem like a natural fit for a racer, only the story is detractive. The systems Ubisoft recycles again and again – the vantage point in *Assassin's Creed* becomes the radio tower in *Far Cry* becomes the transmitter in *Watch Dogs* becomes the GPS station in *The Crew* – are recycled because they work, and if it all seems a little too comfortable now, there might be a reason for that.

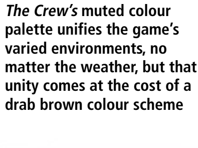
"Ubisoft and all the other companies have to be careful that they're not exhausting people with these mechanics," says *The Crew*'s creative director, **Julian Gerighty**. "[But] I think we're in a privileged position where we play pretty much any game that's out there and see similar mechanics, whether that's *Assassin's Creed* or *Infamous: Second Son*. Not everybody has our luxury of playing all these titles. For me, there are other ways to do [radio towers], but they would have been impossible to achieve in the time frame that we had to launch the game. We have to push ourselves to find better ways and do something; for now, I think this works."

Ubisoft is taking no risks with the game's older systems, but extraordinary risk with the newer ones it tested in the game's public





TOP **Cars can be taken apart and rebuilt with components designed for every terrain, dramatically changing their handling and cosmetic characteristics.** ABOVE ***The Crew*'s miniature recreations of major cities look good until compared against their counterparts in games where just one city is the star; stacking it against *Watch Dogs'* Chicago is especially cruel**



***The Crew's* muted colour palette unifies the game's varied environments, no matter the weather, but that unity comes at the cost of a drab brown colour scheme**







The Koenigseggs and Ferraris that occupy the highest end of *The Crew's* unlock curve take hours of work to reach, making the sight of them on the open road an uncommon one



ABOVE **A mix of circuit and point-to-point races play out on every type of terrain, and Raid missions are a massively multiplayer take on the likes of *Chase HQ*. *The Crew* isn't short on variety**

beta in late July. *The Crew*'s condensed US presents a massive challenge for Ubisoft's QA team. There are thousands of miles of road and countless possible interactions with other players and AI traffic to account for in a world so large that even a team of hundreds couldn't explore it completely.

In the beta code, which dates from before E3, the cars' moon physics made coast-to-coast driving less of a pleasure than was intended to be. Players still did it – "We've seen a lot of people pick up the beta, and as soon as they finish the prologue, go to Los Angeles," Gerighty says – but with enough glitches along the way to cause concern.

"There was a lot of behind-the-scenes work and a lot of very late nights from the tech team," Gerighty tells us. "All round Ubisoft, we were working on making sure the hiccoughs that we ran into were solved as quickly as possible. There are still hundreds of bugs in the game that are amusing when you put them on YouTube, but I'm confident the big things people are concerned about – collisions being one – will be addressed for the final version. We don't have a huge amount of time, but we've still got time."

And time is *The Crew*'s enemy right now. The UI is still a cumbersome thing, and poor presentation has made the economy a subject of community concern. "This is a real concern for us, too," Gerighty admits. "Players have said cars are too expensive, but we want to make every car meaningful. Serge [Hascoet, Ubisoft's chief creative officer] was pushing us to make sure that players understood that your first car is a marriage – it's a commitment between you and this machine for a significant amount of time. That's really a moment we're going to underline."

"Players have said cars are too expensive, but we want to make every car meaningful"

And there's plenty more on the to-do list. "Are we going to be able to improve handling? Absolutely. One of our biggest challenges over the last 12 months has been simplifying the UI. Can we improve it in the time we have left? Yes. Things like voice chat? Definitely. The difficulty will be balanced. And if you want to just drive, you'll be able to turn every challenge off.

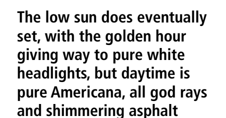
"We've had people from the *Test Drive Unlimited* community playtest it, and one of the guys' feedback was, 'Hey, guys, I don't want to play any of the challenges; I just want to be able to drive around and explore.' This is from a guy who builds his own cockpit and steering wheel setups. He's done 5,000 hours on *Test Drive*. There are people who just want to experience the open road, and we're going to give them the chance."

Evidently, there's a real commitment to addressing player feedback. But with such volumes to sort before November, Ivory Tower and Reflections are going to have to floor it to get *The Crew* ready in time. ■



Crew cut

Full of stereotypes and told like a Fast & Furious sequel even Vin Diesel would have dismissed for being "a bit 2002", *The Crew*'s story sees you falsely accused of your brother's murder and then given a chance to avenge his death. How? By infiltrating an underground car racing syndicate with help from a sexy-but-businesslike female FBI agent, black gang member, coked-up besuited rich white guy, Middle-Eastern high-stakes gambler chap, and so on. It's entirely predictable, but it does an outstanding job of doling out content at a lightning pace, moving you from Detroit to Chicago faster than *Test Drive Unlimited* – a game developed by most of the Ivory Tower team – travelled ten miles.



The low sun does eventually set, with the golden hour giving way to pure white headlights, but daytime is pure Americana, all god rays and shimmering asphalt



Publisher Nintendo
Developer Omega Force, Team Ninja, SPD
Format Wii U
Origin Japan
Release August 14 (JP), September 19 (EU), 26 (NA)





Midna stars in a mission with a three-way battle between her forces, Hylians and Cia's monsters, but Wii U bears up well under the sheer numbers onscreen

HYRULE WARRIORS

A link between worlds

Poor Link. As if being bound to save Hyrule cyclically across the generations wasn't enough, now he has to contend with a stalker. Perhaps it's those snazzy tunics. Being the Hero Of Time, however, he has it a teeny bit worse than being hounded by a high-school ex on Facebook – Cia, a corrupted sorceress and erstwhile guardian against evil, has become fixated on his very soul. She's also hell bent on rending time and space apart to restore an ancient evil to glory. And it's only Link's first day on the job.

If that sounds overdramatic, then it perfectly encapsulates the spirit of *Hyrule Warriors*, which recasts *Zelda* in the mould of Japanese monolith *Dynasty Warriors*, a series famed for its glorious excess. These are games that put hundreds on the field of battle, where hordes fall with each slash of your mighty blade, and where courage is extolled but rarely required, since you're so ludicrously powerful.

Even problematically so: some dismiss *Warriors* games for requiring little more of you than an insatiable appetite for spectacle and callouses enough to withstand pushing buttons at 200bpm. True to form, *Hyrule Warriors* has you hammering out strings of B like you're destruct testing the GamePad before throwing in a tap of Y to, say, scoop 20 Bokoblins into the air for a rising spin attack that then slams them into the verdant ground of Hyrule Field. And yet to call it a button masher is like saying an inferno is hot: sure, but it doesn't quite capture the whole.



Hylian lore already dabbles in the inflation of mythic proportion that *Warriors* games specialise in – Link has always been a one-man army, just a more patient one – yet it's surprising quite how much else series helmer Omega Force has chosen to plunder from Nintendo's treasure chest, and quite how much it enriches the *Warriors* template. L-targeting pulls focus from the crowds to enemy generals and bosses, allowing for single combat to punctuate the gleeful turmoil, while circling and athletic dodging taps into decades-old muscle memory and creates new openings for yet more theatrical finishers. Weak points are an enduring *Zelda* crutch, but they're transformative here, a gauge appearing over enemy hero units at vulnerable points in their attack cycles and dealing out huge damage if emptied. It's a whole new reason to save up your special bar (née Musou) attacks, with judicious timing enough to put a serious dent in not only a troublesome Darknut or Lizalfos, but all those about them.

And who knew that *Zelda* bosses would work so well when freed from claustrophobic dungeon chambers? Early on, we fight Gohma across Faron Woods, this version holding two ornate shields before its giant eye, scattering waves of friendly forces with sweeps of its disgusting limbs. Wearing down its health bar via mashing is possible, but it takes so long as to mean certain defeat for your troops. The solution is classic *Zelda*: whip out the bow from your items menu and stick an arrow in Gohma's eye at the opportune moment to expose its Weak Point Gauge for punishment. Bomb, boomerang and bow are all unlocked in the early hours – every one familiar, every one a thrill to use in novel circumstances.

That kind of fan service is key to *Hyrule Warriors'* appeal, and its creators know it; Cia's meddling in space-time is an excuse to not only battle across a new Hyrule, but those of the past too. Early on, you'll leave the evergreens of Hyrule Field and Faron Woods for branching paths that start in Skyloft, *Ocarina Of Time*'s Death Mountain and the Twilight Fields. There you might fight Midna with the help of bug-obsessed 'princess' Agitha, then join up with the Twili royal, unlocking her as a playable character. You'll also fight as Ganondorf, Darunia, Ruto, and Zelda, each with their own upgrade paths. *Hyrule Warriors* is a crossover event like few in videogames, in other words, but it's also a love letter – one with affection for not just the trappings of a series, but its very soul. ■



Badge of honour

While completing stages unlocks new fighters and weapon types, such as Link's Fire Rod or newcomer Lana's Deku staff, the Bazaar still offers plenty to spend your rupee haul on. In the Smithy, you can transfer powers to empty weapon slots, while the Training Dojo allows you to level up characters for cash, maintaining parity among your quickly swelling party. But it's the badges that soon grew to attract our attention on payday, forged from materials reaped in battle and offering many little buffs across three trees. The Kokiri Sword, for instance, is an Attack badge that extends your B combo, or adds a new Y jumping-off point, while an empty-bottle Defence badge will give the hero a one-use potion to chug each battle. Assist badges are less obvious – Farore's Wind, say, speeding up capturing forts.



TOP **Common enemies are as dumb as they come, but there's no denying that seeing the forces of evil amassed is more impressive than just a few at a time.** RIGHT **Blue-coiffed Lana is a brand-new character, and the yang to Cia's yin. While her design is more generic anime than Hylian (still a better addition than Tingle), she's a capable combatant, creating and then zipping between these blocks of light, which she can explode at will to devastating effect**

TOP **One-on-one combat is a satisfying complement to the mission objectives, which involve a lot of capturing forts. While not as deep as a *Zelda* scuffle, duels do a lot to break up the slaughter.** ABOVE **The level of character detail befits a game built on fan service, but background quality does have to suffer to allow the heroes to pop.** MAIN **While every attack aims to dazzle, you can unleash Focus Spirit with a squeeze of R, provided you have a full magic bar. This increases your speed, power and the item drop rate, but the most useful part is that it modifies your special to expose weak points**



Publisher/ developer Variable State
Format PC
Origin UK
Release 2015





VIRGINIA

An investigation in small-town America with Lynchian overtones

You sense that **Jonathan Burroughs**, a development veteran with a career that has taken him all over the industry, with time served at Electronic Arts, Kuju, Rare and Relentless, is rather enjoying the flexibility of being an indie developer. As, indeed, is the similarly well-travelled other half of Variable State, artist **Terry Kenny**. The pair met at artificial intelligence company DeepMind Technologies, and bonded over a shared fondness for 1990s TV shows such as Twin Peaks and The X Files. Late last year, Burroughs and Kenny began to discuss the idea of developing a game in their spare time, before Google acquired DeepMind and they suddenly found themselves with a lot more time on their hands than anticipated. By February, they had formed Variable State, and by March had a concrete idea of the game they'd like to make. The result is *Virginia*.

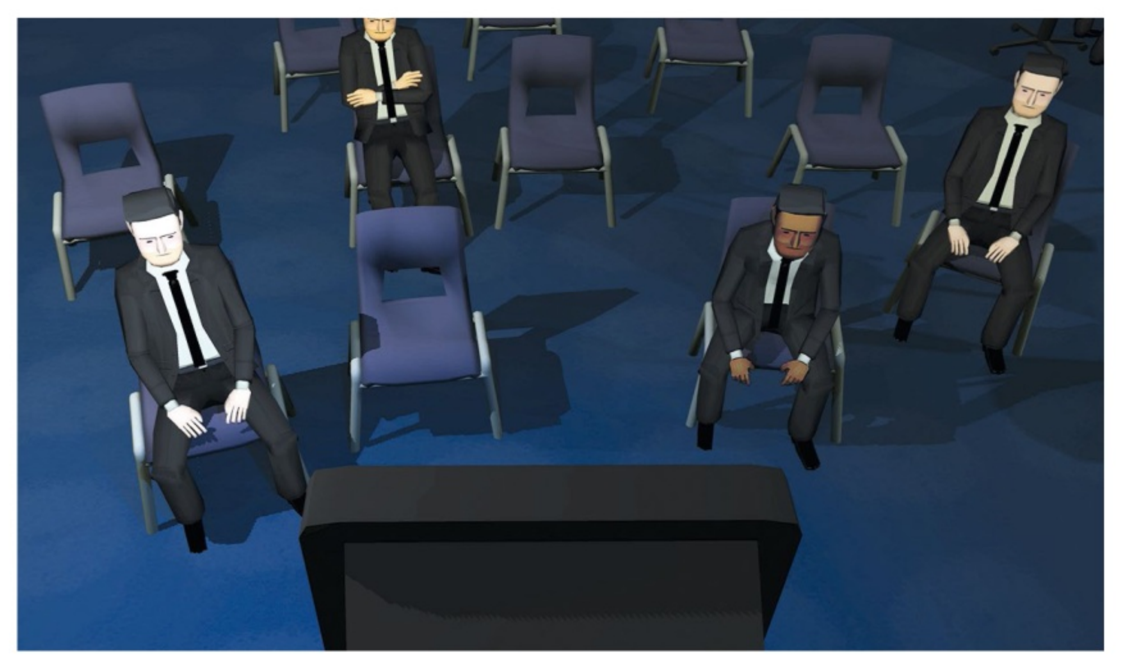
You play as a graduate FBI agent in the Clarice Starling mould, dealing with your first assignment, the disappearance of a local boy. "It's all set in the state of Virginia in the early '90s," Burroughs explains. "There's the tie to the FBI academy at Quantico, and we've expanded from that into the history of Virginia as much as we can. It might just be the texture of the place we manage to capture, but in our research there seemed to be so much about Virginia, the place, that was fascinating for historical reasons, or perhaps could even be interpreted as having some satirical insights into the world as it is now. At the very least, it's a rich source for inspiration when writing a story."

The investigation, it turns out, is just the starting point for a narrative that promises to expand into stranger and broader territory as the game progresses. The tale revolves around





Jonathan Burroughs (top) has a varied CV, having worked as a designer on the likes of *House Of The Dead: Overkill* and *Kinect Sports*. Terry Kenny, meanwhile, worked as an animator at Rockstar North for four years



Kenny is also using The X Files as a reference point for the game's lighting. "It was really dark. Obviously it's atmospheric, but it [also] means you don't have to dress an enormous set, and that's definitely appealing!"



Variable State is keen to avoid generalised mechanics such as those found in *LA Noire*. You'll be able to interact with characters and items of interest, but there will be no laundry lists of objectives to complete

an identifiably human axis, however, by focusing on the central relationship between the player character and their initially antagonistic older partner. "There's another angle where your partner perhaps can't be entirely trusted," says Burroughs. "Our hope is that we can tell a story whereby at the end of the game you've forged an understanding between the two of you, and maybe even a friendship has emerged out of that. The simple core of the story is the formation of this friendship, and [we want] that to really mean something."

That story, however, will be told with very little text and no voice acting whatsoever. It's particularly unusual given the genre: we can't think of many videogame detective stories told without interviews, interrogations or walls of text. It is, Burroughs explains, partly a practical concern. If *Virginia* were to have voiceovers, then they'd need to be of high enough quality to carry the story, and the cost and time involved makes it prohibitive for a small studio like Variable State.

Instead, *Virginia* will rely more on its music and sound design to tell the tale and generate atmosphere, which will, Burroughs hopes, carry an air of Lynchian otherness. Indeed, composer **Lyndon Holland** was selected from over 50 applicants for the job, a horde generated by the listings Burroughs posted on a number of game development websites, and his themes are set to draw upon '90s cinema for inspiration. "Movies like Thelma & Louise, The Fugitive and Bitter Moon all have distinctive synth sounds mixed with live instruments," Holland says, "which is quite different to classic '80s scores from Vangelis, for example, which tend towards pure synth. Hopefully, it doesn't come across as gimmicky – I think it really ties in with the art style we're going for."

Kenny, meanwhile, happily acknowledges the influence of The X Files on the game's aesthetic. "Certainly the first and second seasons were clearly not made on the kind of enormous budget you see TV shows being made on now," he says, "and there's an efficiency in the art design so that they're still quite spooky. As a kid, I remember it stood out from everything else that was on TV at the time." Considering Variable State's similarly limited means, it seems like a particularly good point of reference for *Virginia*'s art style.

"There's another angle where your partner perhaps can't be entirely trusted"

"In all honesty, for my part anyway, it's mostly down to nostalgia," Kenny adds. "It was a time when I was really getting into videogames as well as into those TV shows, so I have fond memories of those things." As such, the style of the game, and even the style of the characters, will be an affectionate nod to the period.

While certain elements of the story will be open to interpretation, however, the tale will be told in unapologetically linear fashion. So far, the opening 20 minutes are playable, and while Burroughs has a strong idea of the central story arc, the rest of development will proceed on a scene-by-scene basis. "It's all about the pacing of the drama," Burroughs says. "Is this moment conveying the right kind of emotion that we want to convey? Is it too long? Is it too short? Is it fitting with the music?" He likens the process to editing a film. "It's great to be approaching it from that mindset. To not necessarily be thinking about mechanics, and instead just focusing on the player having a thrilling ride." ■



Love in

Burroughs and Kenny talk warmly about the likes of *Gone Home* and *Kentucky Route Zero*, but one game in particular had a strong impact on the direction of *Virginia*: Brendon Chung's *30 Flights Of Loving*. "We played it for the first time this year," Burroughs enthuses, "and we had a [revelatory] moment where we realised there was this whole new thread of storytelling. It told the story so effectively, and so leanly. I came away from it thinking I'd played something more emotionally rich than most games I'd played in umpteen years." As a result, *Virginia* will eschew player distractions almost entirely in order to keep the narrative pacing as snappy as possible.

Burroughs thinks roleplaying in relatable situations is one way in which games offer unique opportunities for narratives. "Seeing through the eyes of a character adds a legitimately interesting perspective on storytelling, even if you're telling a linear, start-to-finish kind of story"





Publisher/developer Simogo
Format iOS
Origin Sweden
Release 2014



THE SAILOR'S DREAM

Simogo embarks on a fresh voyage of discovery

A tiny voyage. A little ocean. A small world. Most developers boast about the size of their games, but then most developers aren't Simogo. The Swedish studio has made its name by fashioning exquisitely compact games for iOS devices, each one meticulously crafted and with a tight focus on the elaborate and the intimate. Little wonder, then, that in a game set on a "wonderful but unmerciful" ocean, Simogo should choose to turn its gaze not to the horizons, but to the diminutive knickknacks discovered within buildings found on lonesome isles.

As should be apparent, *The Sailor's Dream* is a very different proposition to Simogo's previous two games, dark thriller *Device 6* and wintry horror *Year Walk*. This will be a warmer, more human story, creative director **Simon Flesser** tells us, akin to rummaging through someone's attic and finding their photographs, letters and old records, and then piecing together a narrative from those fragments. "I think creating things is always some sort of counter-reaction to what you've previously done," he says. "Maybe it's as simple as wanting to try something different, and not wade in the same types of emotions."





FROM TOP **Jonathan Eng, "troubadour extraordinaire" and regular collaborator, and Simon Flesser, one half of the studio, the other being Magnus Gardebäck**

The Sailor's Dream follows a similar pattern of exploration to Simogo's recent efforts, however, with you swiping to pan through environments. A small ocean is your hub, and you'll move left or right across it, stopping as you glimpse islands in the distance. Travelling to them is instantaneous, and once you've moored your boat, you'll navigate between a series of fragmented 'dream rooms'. "We wanted to have this feeling of going deeper and deeper – on the ocean, into these serene structures, then finding old, [seemingly] meaningless objects and discovering what stories they hold," says Flesser.

There will, Flesser explains, be no traditional puzzles in the game; *The Sailor's Dream* will be an entirely challenge-free experience. It's a more natural progression for Simogo than you might think. Consider, for example, the final two chapters of *Device 6*, where roadblocks are cast aside as the story accelerates toward its climax. Nonetheless, Flesser believes that a certain sense of progression and friction is a good thing. "The aim is to try to capture that even within the challenge-free concept," he says.

Will there, we wonder, be a puzzle element to the narrative? "Not really. One thing Jonas [Tarestad, co-writer] and I are constantly talking about story-wise is how exciting that 'secret file' element is. It's like getting a book with pages torn out of it. So most of the story will be there right at the start. But there is some kind of progress that is both tied to what items you've seen…" he pauses to consider his words carefully, "and another [form of] progress that isn't directly tied to progress within the game."

While it might seem as if Flesser is being coy, he's simply keen to preserve as many of the game's mysteries as he can until *The Sailor's Dream* is released, a strategy that proved its worth for *Year Walk* and *Device 6*.

What is clear is that the game has a strong musical component, with sounds often prompted by your interactions with what Flesser calls the game's "dreamy toys". "When we started the project, I had gotten a nice little mobile synth, and I realised as I spent time with it that I was basically playing with it for the sake of play," he says. "That was very inspirational; the game takes place in this dreamy world, and playing with strange objects that just feel joyful to interact with – that are toys rather than puzzles – felt like a natural fit."

We ask Flesser what he hopes players will take away from *The Sailor's Dream*. He pauses once more. "I just hope that they'll feel that they've experienced something special. That there are feelings in there they've felt or understood. Hopefully, something like hearing a beautiful song, [one] that'll stay in your mind even when you're not listening to it." ■



Requiem for a dream

Simogo's sixth game has an eclectic mix of influences, ranging from Tom Waits to *Electroplankton*, but none as significant as that of regular Simogo collaborator Jonathan Eng. He composed the delicate acoustic melody that soundtracks the game's teaser trailer, a song that Flesser says was the inspiration for *The Sailor's Dream*. "Jonathan [played] me that in early 2011," he says, "and it's been in my head since then. We've talked back and forth during the years [since] about how to make a game that captures the feeling of that song. It's the only piece of music that has not been newly produced for the game, but it felt like a complete circle to have it in the reveal trailer."



TOP **There is a lighthouse on one island. Does that mean we should expect a nod to *Device 6*? "No, it's a separate thing. I just love lighthouses too damn much," says Flesser.**
RIGHT **Most locations will be available from the start, though Simogo is still discussing how players will progress. "It's a small world," says Flesser. "It's more about offering this little box of things, rather than a huge world"**

TOP **Simogo sees this as the third and final entry in its second suite of games. Flesser hopes that it will earn enough that the studio can afford to spend 2015 working on a series of smaller experiments.**
ABOVE **The game now has a more three-dimensional feel, after an early 2D prototype was thrown out. "In *Year Walk* and *Device 6*, we wanted it to feel tangible, like you were walking. But we decided early on that we wanted [this] to feel more like [you were] floating through the environments."**
MAIN **Flesser hopes to craft a game world that is purely pleasurable to spend time in – the likes of *Proteus* and *Ico* are cited as influences**

RESIDENT EVIL

Publisher/developer Capcom **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** 2015



Resident Evil 6 **suggested Capcom is no longer entirely sure what it wants its genre-defining series to be, so let's hope this trip back to where it all began provides some clarity. This isn't a remake of the PlayStation original, however, but 2002's GameCube version, with its improved animation, new areas and character-specific weaponry. The boost to 1080p visuals (720p on 360 and PS3) and shift to 16:9 means those fixed views will scroll a little to make up for the lost vertical screen space, but the biggest change is to the controls, with an option to have Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine move in the direction of the analogue stick.**

NEVER ALONE

Publisher/developer Upper One Games **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** Autumn



An eerie, *Limbo*-inspired puzzle-platformer based on themes drawn from the Iñupiat and other indigenous Alaskan tribes, *Never Alone* is being made by Upper One Games, a studio set up by an Alaskan tribal council. *Never Alone*'s intended to not just spread Alaskan culture around the world, but also its own people; while these stories have been passed down for generations, many young Iñupiat are too busy playing videogames to pay much heed to tribal tradition.

ASSASSIN'S CREED: ROGUE

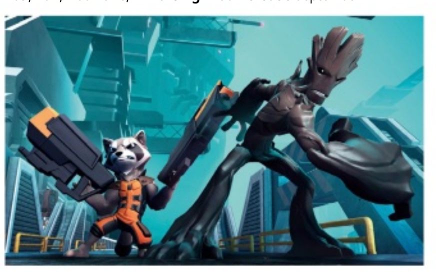
Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Sofia) **Format** 360, PS3 **Origin** Bulgaria **Release** November 11



Ubisoft isn't leaving those tens of millions of 360 and PS3 owners behind just yet. But with the focus on *Unity*, Ubisoft Sofia is tinkering with tradition; here, players will guide an Assassin-hunting Templar, Shay Patrick Cormac (we suspect he might be Irish), across North American land and sea.

DISNEY INFINITY: MARVEL SUPER HEROES (2.0 EDITION)

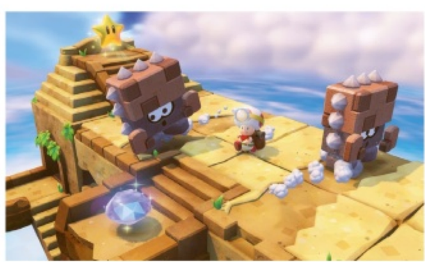
Publisher/developer Disney (Avalanche) **Format** 360, iOS, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U **Origin** US **Release** September



Skylanders **was never going to see off *Disney Infinity* forever, and the threat has only grown now that the Guardians Of The Galaxy have been confirmed for the *Marvel Super Heroes* edition. Star Wars can't be far away, either. Millions of plastic dragons just cried out in terror, and were suddenly silenced.**

CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER

Publisher/developer Nintendo **Format** Wii U **Origin** Japan **Release** Q4 (US, JP), January (EU)



Nintendo's treatment of Europe has improved, but that can make its little slip-ups all the harder to stomach – and even more so when the company admits that it's delaying a game for its own strategic benefit. It's a busy Christmas for Wii U, but surely *Treasure Tracker* is perfect stocking-filler material?


T3
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LIKE A PRO
WEARABLES,
APPAREL AND
CHAMPION KIT
TO REBOOT
YOUR YEAR
IN PRINT, ON TABLET AND SMARTPHONE
ON SALE NOW
Google play
App Store
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SP
SUCKER PUNCH
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FIRST LIGHT
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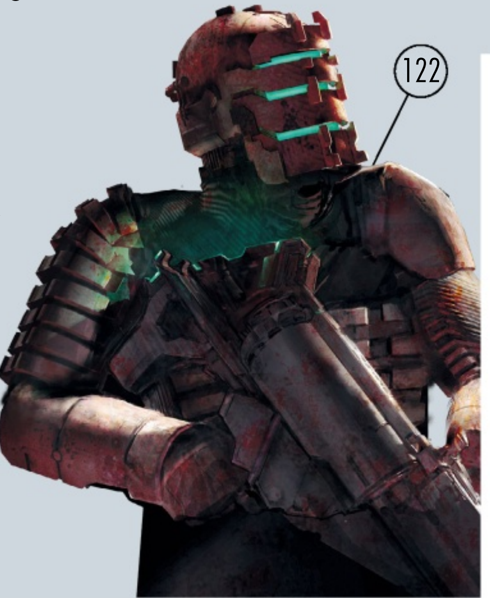
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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY





RETURN OF THE KING

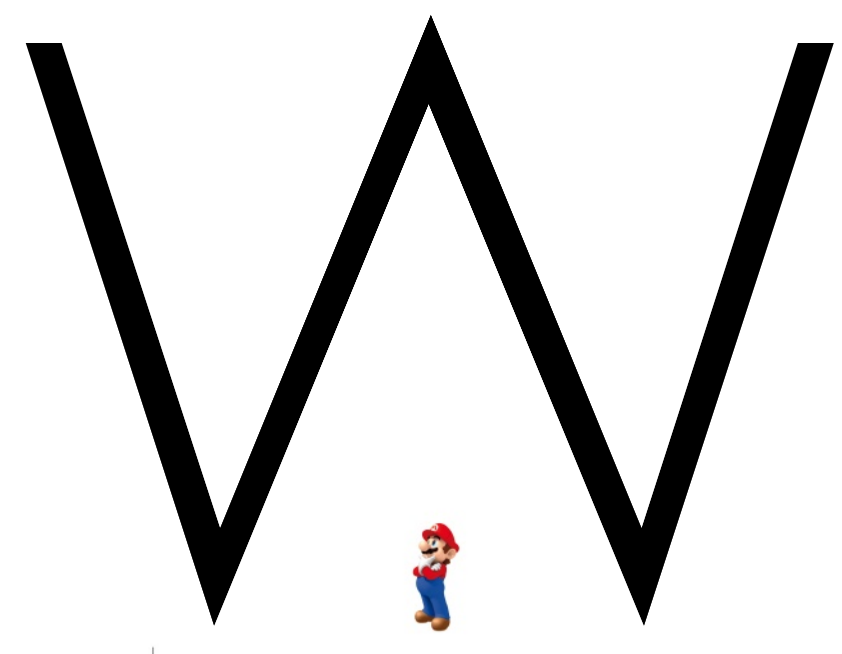




After Nintendo's best E3 in years, Shigeru Miyamoto explains why building something new is the key to Wii U's fightback

By Nathan Brown

Photography **Will Ireland**



We may have upset **Shigeru Miyamoto**. Not that you'd ever know it to look at him – he remains as cheery and animated as ever, spry despite his 61 years, chuckling through interview responses and mugging for the camera. But when we tell him that his new games are difficult, he tenses briefly. After all, when Miyamoto previously made an **Edge** cover appearance, he was making *Wii Music*, more toy than game. It was playful, certainly, but it was perhaps the least game-like release on a console that went out of its way to accommodate the inexperienced. In contrast, the trio of prototype Wii U games Miyamoto took to E3 this year – *Project Guard*, *Project Giant Robot* and *Star Fox* – use the GamePad's swollen featureset in such uncommon ways that even the seasoned brain takes time to adjust.

"It's not as difficult as you might think," Miyamoto tells us after we've struggled our way through a *Star Fox* demo and admitted to having done the same with *Project Guard*. "Each mission is simple when you break it down into its component parts. To me, what is more important is that the more you play, the more you are going to get accustomed to it. You can feel, 'OK, I'm making progress; I'm getting better and better.'

"I do not need to explain this kind of thing to you and the readers of **Edge**, because each of you is a gamer. Gamers have experienced that. But there are a lot of people in the world who do not understand that special kind of charm that videogames have."

It was the latter camp, however, that made Nintendo the market leader in both the home console and handheld markets with Wii and DS. And so it is the latter camp that investors and analysts have suggested Nintendo continue to court, believing free-to-play smartphone versions of *Mario* and *Pokémon* to be the key to regaining the vast expanded market that Nintendo created and then ceded to iOS, Facebook and Android. That Miyamoto, one of the longest-serving creatives in the industry and Nintendo's most revered and recognisable employee, is again making games for people who play games says much about where his employer's priorities now lie.

In short, it's with you. Miyamoto and his staff are not designing games for "the sort of people who, for example, might want to watch a movie. They might want to go to Disneyland. Their attitude is, 'OK, I am the customer. You are supposed to entertain me.' It's kind of a passive attitude they're taking, and to me it's kind of a pathetic thing. They do not know how interesting it is if you move one step further and try to challenge yourself. [If you do that,] you're going to learn how fun it is."

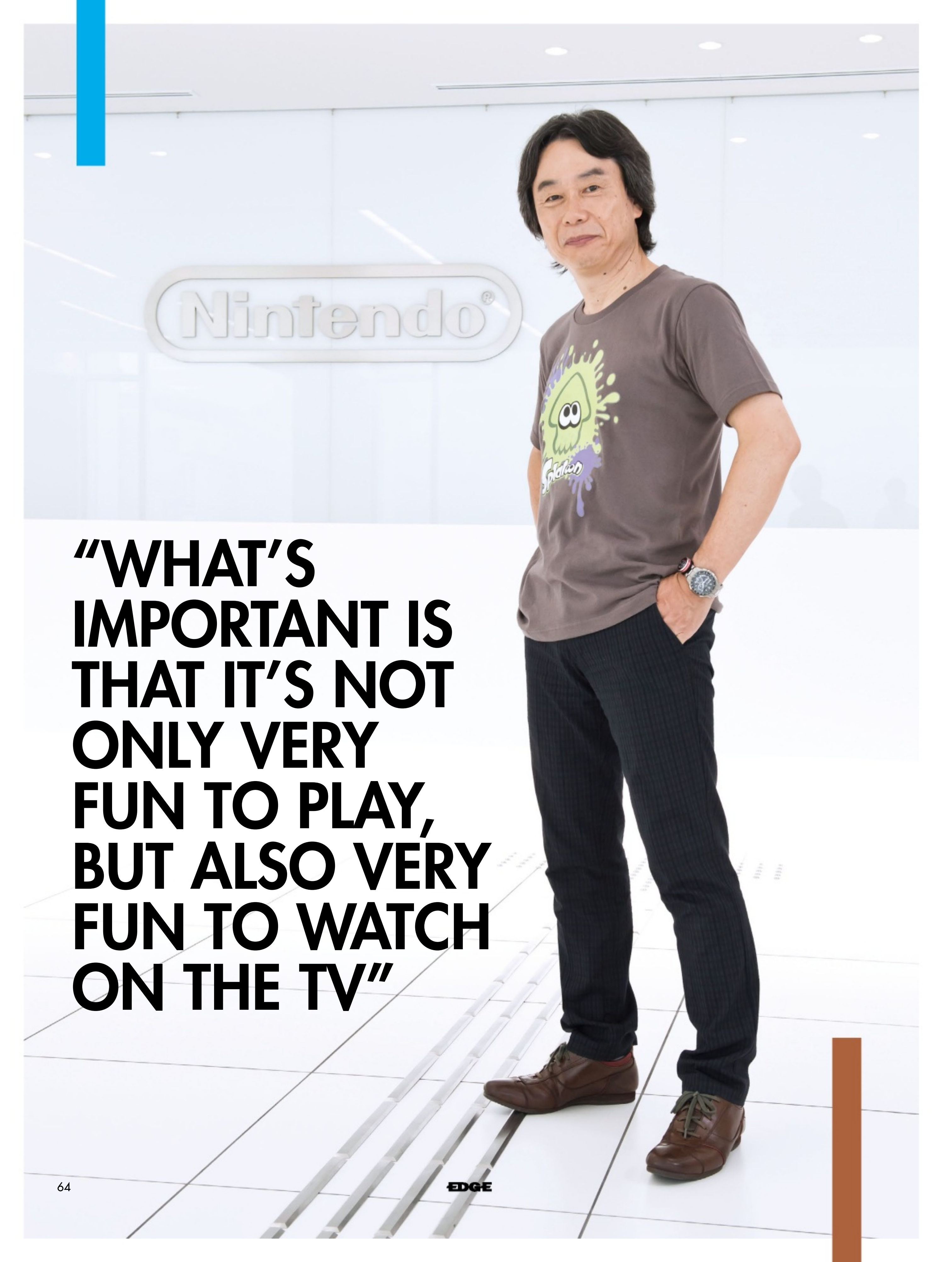
As happy as we are to hear it confirmed, the signs of a shift in Nintendo's approach have been there for a while. From the moment Satoru Iwata took to the E3 stage in 2011 and held up Wii U's GamePad, in fact. Where the Wii Remote was a study in simplicity, the GamePad was built for complexity. Its twin sticks and sets of triggers, its gyroscope and NFC, and, above all, its in-built touchscreen meant that a new *Wii Sports* was never going to be the game to sell it. It is the most feature-rich input device Nintendo has ever made, and any game that is going to show off all that it can do is naturally going to be intricate.

And, yes, difficult. It's the second screen that often contributes most to the challenge, requiring you to shift focus between the TV panel ten feet away and the screen in your lap. You can end up effectively trying to play two games at once. It's something Nintendo was conscious of from very early on when Wii U was still in R&D. "Of course we had some concerns," Miyamoto says. "After all, we're human beings: our eyes cannot see two objects at the same time. But we were sure that, even with that kind of, say, weak point, we would be able to make something unprecedented and revolutionary."

Miyamoto intends to have the new *Star Fox* on shelves next year, and has spoken of working with an external studio to hurry things along



"THEY DO NOT KNOW HOW INTERESTING IT IS IF YOU MOVE ONE STEP FURTHER AND TRY TO CHALLENGE YOURSELF"



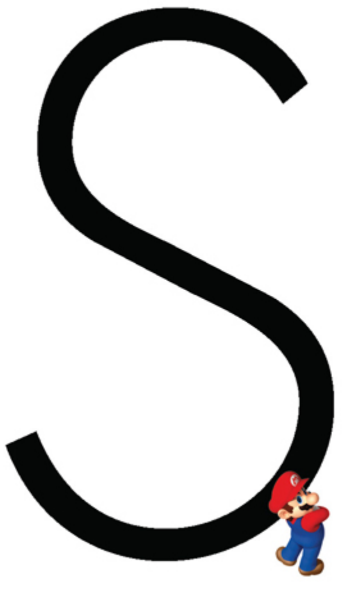
"WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS THAT IT'S NOT ONLY VERY FUN TO PLAY, BUT ALSO VERY FUN TO WATCH ON THE TV"

Star Fox doesn't look like either of those things yet – quite the opposite, in fact, since it reuses assets from an abandoned Wii prototype and gameplay from its 17-year-old N64 incarnation. You have to pick up the GamePad and play to understand what Miyamoto's getting at. On the TV screen is a traditional *Star Fox* game, the camera positioned behind Fox McCloud's Arwing, grainy picture-in-picture shots of Falco, Peppy and Slippy popping up in the bottom corner. The left analogue stick controls the Arwing; the right stick is tied to barrel rolls, speed boosts and brakes; and the two in conjunction are used for loop-the-loops and U-turns. It's standard stuff, and then you look down to your hands, where the GamePad shows the view from McCloud's cockpit in firstperson, its aim adjusted with the gyroscope. For the first time, your Arwing's flight path and line of fire can be controlled independently. We look at the TV screen to track targets and move the GamePad to shoot them down, and we're doing fine until we reach the boss. In an Arwing-like craft of his own, our assailant U-turns away as soon as we have him in our sights, and we need the assistance of the most famous man in videogames to track him down. One pair of eyes doesn't feel like enough.

We also need some guidance in *Project Guard*, in which you defend a facility from a horde of advancing robots using guns mounted on CCTV cameras. At the outset, you use the touchscreen to place and rotate your dozen cameras; once the action starts, you tap icons to switch between them. All 12 feeds are shown around the perimeter of the TV screen, with a large central display showing the currently active camera. It's frantic stuff, and you can see Miyamoto's hand in how playful it is. Little skittery robots have footballs for heads. Mechanical parrots peck cameras loose from their mountings, flinging them into the distance or walking around with them on their heads. Pink tanks can't be destroyed, only disabled, their blip staying distractingly on the radar. Stealth tanks are invisible to instruments, however, and it's in spotting them manually that company proves invaluable, with our partner frantically calling out which cameras need our urgent attention.

When we survive, it feels like a shared victory. This, Miyamoto says, is quite deliberate. "What's important is that it's not only very fun to play, but also very fun to watch on the TV screen; everybody else in the living room will be able to enjoy it. That has always been important for Wii U." *Star Fox* may be the headline act, but *Project Guard* is the real star, pleasingly tactile, pacy and fully formed despite being so early in development.

After *Project Guard*, however, *Project Giant Robot* is a little deflating. There is potential here – you build a robot then take it into battle against seemingly randomly generated opponents, using the GamePad's analogue sticks to punch and its gyroscopes to shift momentum and put some force behind your blows – but it's clearly a game about physics and the physics aren't quite there yet. It is, of course, just a prototype, and while it may not convince as a game in its current form, its mere existence is further proof of Nintendo's desire for change.



So, too, was its presence alongside *Project Guard* and *Star Fox* at E3. The notion of Nintendo, perhaps the most fiercely secretive company in games, taking prototypes to the biggest show on Earth still feels incomprehensible even now. Nintendo, like so many Japanese studios, keeps its in-development games out of the public eye until a vertical slice has been polished to a sheen worthy of final release. On the eve of its Space World event in 1995, then-president Hiroshi Yamauchi pulled ten N64 demos from display because he didn't think they were refined enough to be able to properly show off what Nintendo's new console was capable of. It speaks volumes that the Nintendo of 2014 is willing to show a *Star Fox* game with Wii assets and N64 mission design.

But so much of Nintendo's E3 was nontraditional this year. It abandoned its Tuesday morning media briefing, instead making its announcements in a prerecorded Nintendo Direct broadcast. At E3s past, an all-too-brief trailer would be all you'd see of a game; here the day-long Treehouse livestreams showed new titles being played for 40 minutes at a time, often with developer commentary as well. While Nintendo's lineup of games still contained plenty of old faces, many were being used in unexpected ways. Mario powers not a platform game, but a platform game creation tool. Link fronts two games, one that seeks to cast off the conventions of an almost 30-year legacy and another that's a cheery hack-and-slash title being made outside of the company's walls.

And then there's *Splatoon*, a raucous, playful and riotously colourful multiplayer shooter in which you fire globs of paint to cover more of the arena than the opposition, and reload by turning into a squid. It's perhaps the finest example of Nintendo's new mission to offer fresh takes on well-established templates. And yet it was so nearly very different.

"There were heated debates over who the main player character should be," Miyamoto says. "Whether it should be Mario, or a squid. When we talked about the possibility of it being Mario, of course we could think ▶







The three prototypes (from top): *Project Guard*, *Star Fox* and *Project Giant Robot*. The only way to see *Star Fox* at E3 was via a behind-closed-doors demo from Miyamoto himself



of the advantages: anybody would be willing to touch it as soon as we announced that we had the new *Mario* game. But at the same time, we had some worries. If it were Mario, we wouldn't be able to create any new IP."

That desire, combined with the gameplay potential of a new character – somehow, we can't see Mario dipping below a painted floor and flanking unseen round behind the enemy at high speed before lobbing a grenade at the back of an opponent's head – meant the squid won out.

Yet this is a risky project for more reasons than just who gets to appear in pride of place on the boxart. This may be an endearingly unconventional spin on the most oversubscribed genre in console videogaming, but it is still a step into well-trodden territory in which Nintendo has little experience. And in which, to be blunt, it has never seemed terribly interested before now. "I've always liked the control mechanism of the shooter, personally," Miyamoto says, possibly tensing up again. "And, you know, I've always been rather good at making action games. I was also a producer on *Metroid Prime*, so I would never say that I don't like shooters.

"I've always been interested in their controls. Instead of thinking of [entering] the already-fierce rivalry in the shooter arena, I thought we'd be able to come up with an unprecedented, but still appropriate, control system [using the GamePad]." And the look of the game? "Shooters have tended to become more photorealistic, but it's not Nintendo's way to do that. It's [got] to be different from what other folks are doing."

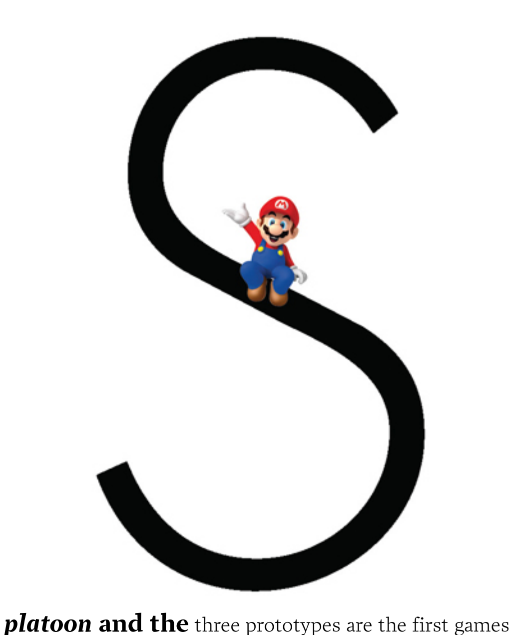


Bayonetta 2* dev PlatinumGames has quickly become one of Nintendo's most valuable thirdparties: it also developed Wii U action game *The Wonderful 101









***platoon* and the** three prototypes are the first games to emerge from Garage, a new Nintendo development programme set up last year in which developers break off into small teams and work on new ideas. "There are increasing numbers of young staff at Nintendo's development studios these days," Miyamoto says, "and these young guys really want to express themselves." Work is done during office hours, but he compares Garage to an after-school club, in spirit if not in schedule. "Class time's over; they gather together and think about new projects completely apart from their everyday business assignments. When all of these projects have advanced to a certain stage, we gather together and exchange opinions on the outcome of each of them, and together we decide which ones should continue. We may have shown several software titles at E3 [that came from Garage], but there are many others in development, too."

The first fruits of the Garage initiative were combined with more traditional fare such as *Yoshi's Woolly World*, a new *Zelda* game and thirdparty exclusive *Bayonetta 2* to give what many considered the best E3 lineup of any of the platform holders. Miyamoto certainly wasn't all that impressed by what he saw as he looked around E3 2014's sprawling show floor, telling Nintendo investors there was too much "bloody shooter software", and that it reflected a certain "creative immaturity" among the developers working today. A senior Nintendo executive criticising the work of others? Things have changed.

"Oh, I've made quite the grand statement, haven't I?" he laughs. "My comment was based upon the fact that I have not been fully satisfied with the inspirations that I have or that other people in the industry have in general. I feel that industry trends, rather than the creator's individuality and uniqueness, tend to be prioritised. When the people who manage the development budget take the lead in making a game, creators tend to make games that are already popular in the marketplace. Even when there is opportunity for young developers to make something freely, they tend to make similar proposals. I can't help but feel that the industry has a long way to go. I hope Nintendo will always be a company that aggressively invests in something new – something born from each creator's individual characteristics."

Nintendo doesn't just need to make new kinds of videogame; it needs to make them quickly. Miyamoto has already admitted that Nintendo somehow did not anticipate the extra work required when making games in HD, and while team sizes have since been duly scaled up and staff properly trained, Wii U's first 18 months on shelves have been hampered by a sparse release schedule, which only now seems to be picking up speed. With thirdparty support once again elusive, Nintendo has taken to buying up troubled projects that are far along in development (Sega cancelled Platinum's *Bayonetta 2*; THQ, publisher of Tomonobu Itagaki's *Devil's Third*, went bust). And while *Hyrule Warriors* might be a landmark game for Nintendo's licensing department, it is merely the latest in a series that has produced some 30 games in the past five years alone; when it is released, Koei Tecmo will go back to making *Warriors* games on its own. The next thing on Platinum's to-do list is *Scalebound* for Xbox One. Both *Bayonetta 2* and *Devil's Third* will be on shelves before the end of the year, and Nintendo can only scour other people's cutting-room floors for so long.

Garage is one solution to that. "With the increasing number of developers involved in one project, we need to spend longer simply communicating," Miyamoto says. "So we can feel the same pleasure [as the old days], I have ▶


"I HOPE NINTENDO WILL ALWAYS BE A COMPANY THAT AGGRESSIVELY INVESTS IN SOMETHING NEW"

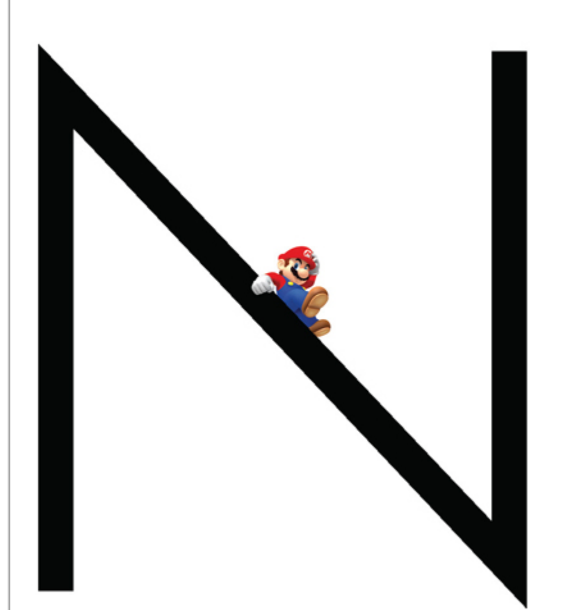


"FOR US TO MEET THESE GOALS, WE NEED DEDICATED HARDWARE"

been experimenting with new ideas in small teams. Only later do we organise a larger team to make the final product. Well, this is my ideal, at least; things have not gone quite as I has expected. But I believe this way of making games is really important when we need a lot of time in order to make a game such as the ones for Wii U."

Nintendo remains keen to work with thirdparties, so long as they're prepared to use the GamePad properly, but that won't happen much until hardware sales pick up. With another fiscal quarter of disappointing sales behind it – just half a million sales worldwide, even despite the launch of *Mario Kart 8* – Nintendo once again faced calls from investors to change its ways. In fact, it already has, building the new Kyoto R&D facility where we meet Miyamoto. Opened in June, the building sits 300 metres away from Nintendo's head office and houses some 1,500 developers working in secret. The company has integrated its handheld and home console hardware teams, too, which should avoid a repeat of its current situation of having two systems on shelves that are so architecturally different. You sense it's not just about workflow, but that Nintendo is also making a statement: its hardware business isn't disappearing any time soon.

"As I said before, there are always people who really want to get deeply into a game," Miyamoto says. "We want to create, and they want to experience, something unprecedented all the time. For us to meet these goals, we need dedicated hardware that is designed to cater to the needs of these avid gamers. People might say that software is software. No. A unique software experience can always be realised with unique hardware that has a unique interface. That's why I believe that Nintendo is, and will be, sticking to these dedicated game machines."



intendo's annual report for 2013 opens with a close-up photo of a young boy. Mario's head is reflected in his eyes. The image bears a telltale caption: "I grew up with Nintendo's games." This is Nintendo's new target audience: you, not your mum. "In the days of DS and Wii, Nintendo tried its best to expand the gaming population," Miyamoto says. "Fortunately, because of the spread of smart devices, people take games for granted now. It's a good thing for us, because we do not have to worry about making games something that are relevant to general people's daily lives." Investors want another *Brain Training*, another *Wii Sports*, but who would those games be for now that everyone plays games?

While Nintendo can be criticised for being too stuck in its ways, much of its reticence to hitch itself to the latest monetisation bandwagon can be interpreted as respecting the player. It stood by as the industry dabbled in season passes; its DLC is the exception rather than the rule. It has shown no interest in trying to have its cake and eat it by adding microtransactions to paid releases.

Miyamoto still plays games, but most of his time is spent putting Nintendo's projects through their paces. When a big new game gets everyone talking, he asks staff to play it and report back. However, he has found the rise of free-to-play impossible to ignore. He's played *Angry Birds*, *Candy Crush Saga* and *Puzzle & Dragons*, and while there's respect for their creators, he's in no mood to follow their lead. "There are free-to-play videogames all around us, but what we're doing is asking game players for decent money," he says. "If we think about how we can do that – about the kinds of games that players feel like spending their money on – then from that naturally comes the games we are making right now."

Investors and analysts struggle to see beyond the next fiscal quarter, but Miyamoto and Nintendo are playing a longer game. It has been a rough few years, but what's that to a company that's been in business for over a century, that has sold over 600 million systems and four billion games? Miyamoto has been with Nintendo since 1977. He has seen trends come and go. "My only point of comparison, all the time, is my past work," he tells us. "I've been trying to investigate what's happening outside of the company, but I'm not doing that for the sake of competition or rivalry. I really always want to make something unique, something new."

In western game development, you're called a veteran if you've been around for 20 years. Miyamoto has been in games for almost 40, and has spent his entire career in the employ of a single company. "I've always thought of Nintendo as my sponsor," he says. "As the company grew and was able to generate more profit, my impression was, 'OK, the company has become a better sponsor. I will be able to do even more'. Of course, I help to manage the company right now, instead of simply feeling that the company is my sponsor. I just cannot say anything that might upset our shareholders at all! But, to me, what is important is being in a position to make something unique. After all, I like making games."

That's why Nintendo won't make free-to-play games. It's why it has integrated its R&D teams, overhauled its processes, and assembled its best E3 lineup in years. There will be no iOS *Mario*, no trips to Disneyland, no bloody shooter software. Shigeru Miyamoto is making games again, and he's making them for you. ■



Mario Kart 8 sold 2.8 million copies in its first month, but it failed to drive the surge in Wii U sales Nintendo hoped for





Nintendo's annual report may make glum reading for investors, but it says much about where its priorities now lie

WII SPEAK





We meet the minds behind the next wave of Wii U games as Nintendo's console gets ready to switch up a gear

By Nathan Brown

EIJI AONUMA
ZELDA FRANCHISE SUPERVISOR

TAKASHI TEZUKA
PRODUCER, *YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD, MARIO MAKER*

HISASHI NOGAMI
PRODUCER, *SPLATOON*

TOMONOBU ITAGAKI
CHIEF TECHNICAL OFFICER, *DEVIL'S THIRD*

TETSUYA TAKAHASHI
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, *XENOBLADE CHRONICLES X*

MASAHIRO SAKURAI
DIRECTOR, *SUPER SMASH BROS*

ETSUNOBU EBISU
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, *YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD*

YOSUKE HAYASHI
DEVELOPMENT PRODUCER, *HYRULE WARRIORS*

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

Developer Nintendo EAD **Format** Wii U **Release** 2015



EIJI AONUMA
ZELDA FRANCHISE SUPERVISOR, NINTENDO

Reinventing one of the most successful videogame series of all time is no easy task, but **Eiji Aonuma** is seeking to do just that with *The Legend Of Zelda*'s Wii U debut. He speaks of a return to the exploration of the 1986 original, too, letting players wander the world – its dungeons and temples – in any order they choose.

You've been rethinking Nintendo's approach to *Zelda* games for some time now. You've spoken about what you want to change, but what are the foundational principles of *Zelda* that are immutable?
That's a difficult question. Recently, I've been posting some articles on the Japanese Nintendo homepage to explain *Zelda* games to users who don't know much about this series, and there I've talked about the ideas of growth and empathy.

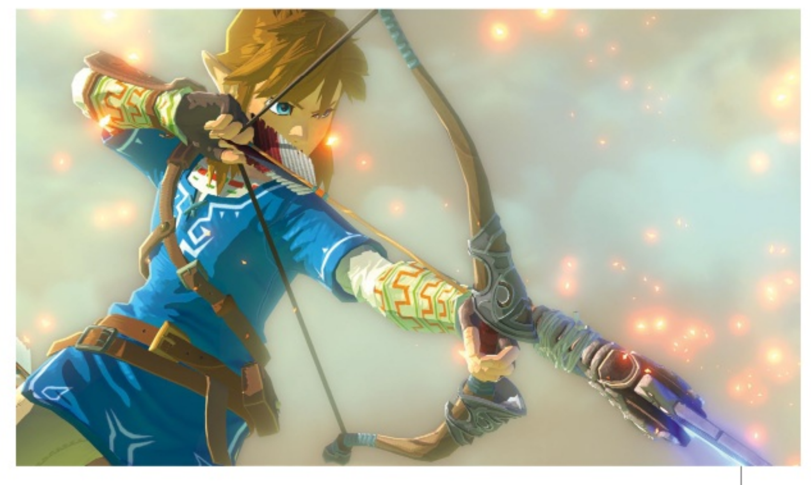
In *Zelda* games, players share the experiences of the main character as they grow from being somewhat insignificant into someone who can do all sorts of things. Although empathy is a fairly intangible thing, it's something that disappears as soon as you feel that it's being forcibly elicited. I work hard to try to make things that don't end up being thought of in that way.

What have you learned from the reaction to the E3 trailer – specifically the way that many people took your enigmatic interview responses as tacit confirmation that it wasn't Link on that horse, but a girl?
I should watch what I say [laughs]. I purposely tried not to talk too much about the new game at this year's E3. That's because I was not in a position to give clear information about what kind of game it is, and also because, by doing so, I wanted to gauge people's reactions as they tried to get an idea about this new game.

Rather unexpectedly, after I mentioned that no one had explicitly said that it was Link [in the trailer], this speculation spread online and seems to have led to the idea that the main character will be a girl. However, this reaction from the fans is something I would like to take into consideration as we proceed with development – although that doesn't mean that we are going to change the main character to a girl.

What are the biggest challenges of adapting a largely linear design to suit a world we can freely explore?
In the original *Legend Of Zelda*, there was no clear way to lead the main character to his goal. It was something that we entrusted to the players to find by themselves. As the game later expanded into a franchise, the structure of the game worlds became more and more complex – especially with the introduction of 3D – making it necessary for us to point the player in the right direction. Consequently, progression in the games became more linear.

To recreate a similar experience to the original, we have to give the game world a simple structure that



Aonuma's interview responses after E3 prompted rumours that this isn't Link, but a girl. While the lead is still male, the reaction was eye-opening

"THE INNOVATION OF A VAST OPEN WORLD COULD IN ONE SENSE BE SEEN AS A RETURN TO THE ROOTS OF THE SERIES"





The game's current look is very different from the tech demo shown at E3 2011, which was more akin to *Twilight Princess* than *Skyward Sword*



players can understand intuitively. In doing so, it's very important that we make every aspect of the world feel real and physically connected, so that it doesn't look fake.

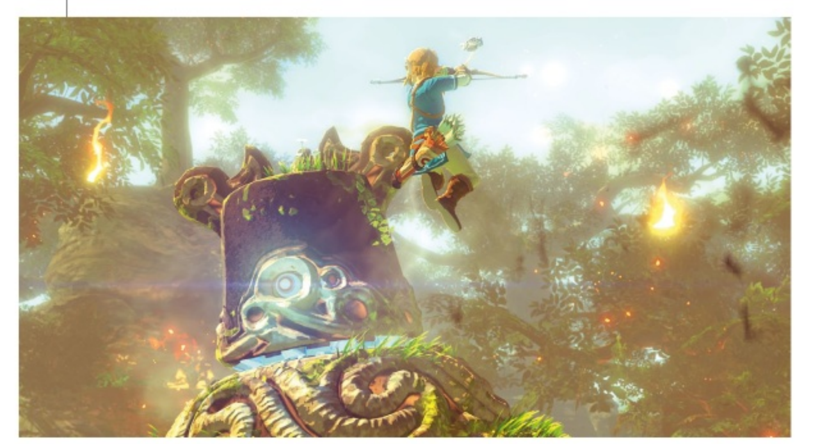
We can achieve this thanks to the hardware features of Wii U, but to truly get a deep understanding of the game world, we also need a real map that depicts this world as it is. The GamePad is very effective for displaying this, and thus also [for] providing players with a constant hint on where to head to. I think we can safely say that the innovations in this new game are only possible thanks to the Wii U hardware.

Nintendo has a track record of defining new types of games, but others pioneered the open-world template. What do you plan to do, and need to do, to ensure this adventure is held in the same regard as, say, *Ocarina Of Time*?
Since we're talking about the concept of 'open worlds' now, I'd like to state upfront that in this new *Zelda* game we don't plan to have an open world in the same way other companies have been doing in recent years.

The innovation of a vast open world could in one sense be seen as a return to the roots of the series. But in returning to these roots, we are also bringing with us all the things we have learned and ways the series has developed over all this time, which will help to create new and exciting gameplay possibilities.



Link fires arrows on horseback in the trailer, suggesting a return to the mounted combat of GameCube/Wii release *Twilight Princess*



This new approach suggests the game will do away with gear-gating, where the hookshot found in one dungeon opens the path to the next and so on. How will you approach that? How happy were you with *A Link Between Worlds*' item rental as a solution?
I think the item rental system had the effect of changing how the game progresses and users' way of thinking about this. However, I heard that quite a few players felt let down by the fact that it lacked the classic *Zelda* game element of exploring dungeons to acquire items that would gradually let them do more.

I mentioned earlier that the important elements in *Zelda* games are growth and empathy, and I think that acquiring new items in order to reach new areas was an element [of gameplay] related to the idea of growth. I realised that in order to satisfy all players, we must not only to come up with new ideas, but also include something that allows players to experience the same enjoyable elements from older titles in the series in a new way. We'll be keeping this balance in mind for our new game, too.

With *Mario Kart 8* and *Super Mario 3D World* failing to drive sales dramatically, Wii U needs Link now more than ever. While this new adventure looks astounding, Aonuma's design changes will be key





The series has drifted away from the spirit of exploration of the NES original (top). *A Link Between Worlds* (above) lets players rent items and tackle dungeons in any order they choose

MARIO MAKER

Developer Nintendo EAD **Format** Wii U **Release** First half of 2015



TAKASHI TEZUKA
PRODUCER, NINTENDO

Originally meant for internal use, *Mario Maker* is part tool, part game, enabling you to craft your own 2D *Mario* levels on a GamePad. You can play it straight, but Nintendo's sample designs encourage experimentation – one example level features a screen-wide pyramid of flying Goombas, for instance.

You've said that *Mario Maker* was conceived with internal teams in mind. Why did you decide it was suitable for the public, too?
It all started when our internal tool team realised how fun it was to create and play 8bit *Super Mario* courses using the prototype tool they were making. But we didn't want to release this tool just as it was as a game, since our job is to provide entertainment. We felt that a game where all you can do is make 8bit *Super Mario* courses wouldn't be enough, so we investigated what made the tool team so excited and tried to turn that prototype into a game that's fun to play.

How were *Mario* levels made beforehand, if you felt an in-house editor would be useful?
Courses in past *Super Mario* games have also been developed using special course editors, but on a PC. The difference here is that we were developing a course editor that would work on Wii U. This means that it's possible to create courses while using the GamePad to quickly and intuitively test how they play.

Will internal teams also use it?
Courses in future 2D *Mario* games won't be made using the actual *Mario Maker* game. However, we will continue developing *Mario* course editing tools for use on Wii U because of how wonderfully easy they are to use on a GamePad. *Mario Maker* is essentially a game based on creating; we don't consider it to be just a course editing tool. The kinds of fun elements included in *Mario Maker* – setting up enemies piled up like a tower, for instance – aren't necessary for making actual Mario courses. The editor would need a higher level of functionality tailored for the specific game being made, so naturally we will need to continue developing specialised tools.

"WE WILL NEED TO HAVE A SYSTEM FOR SHARING COURSES ONLINE, ONE THAT'S TAILORED TO MARIO MAKER"

How are you going to approach players sharing their creations? Are you concerned it could harm sales of future *Mario* games?
What I most want to achieve with *Mario Maker* is to stimulate the imagination of the people playing it. I want them to try out their creations – sometimes getting an expected result, [and] other times, something completely different – and then use that experience to come up with even more creative things to try the next time.

In addition to the fun you can have making courses, I'm sure there will be people who want to share the courses they made with others, and also people who want to play on courses made by others. For these users, we will need to have a system for sharing courses online, one that's tailored to *Mario Maker*.

I think part of the fun of *Mario* is how you play and experience a series of courses, with boss battles too, all of which get progressively harder. *Mario* developers build up the whole world, making sure the different courses all fit well together. I don't think the overall fun you can have with an entire *Mario* game is the same as playing a single course made in *Mario Maker*, and of course future *Mario* games will include lots of new features... so I don't think the two will ever be in competition.



Example courses are meant to get you thinking about *Mario* in different ways, stacking enemies here to be taken out with a single red shell



Currently, you can only switch between the art styles from *Super Mario Bros* and Wii U launch title *Super Mario Bros U*, though more will be ready by launch

SPLATOON

Developer Nintendo EAD **Format** Wii U **Release** First half of 2015

The first full game to emerge from the Garage initiative is a bright multiplayer shooter in which victory is not about kills, but territory. Armed with guns and tanks of paint, players compete against opponents in a battle to cover areas with their colours.

The game is, at its core, an online shooter – a highly competitive genre in which Nintendo is inexperienced. What have been the most challenging aspects of developing something so new?
When we go about making new games, we don't have a particular genre in mind at first, so it wasn't that we intentionally set out to make an online shooter. One of the biggest challenges was simply coming up with something new and fun, because our main objective was creating a game that could be enjoyed by experienced gamers as well as those who haven't played competitive online games before.

Why did you pick thirdperson perspective over firstperson?
In *Splatoon*, players switch between a squid and human form, so they need to be able to see themselves at all times. The actions players take will also change based on what colour of paint is at their feet so, again, it's important that they can see this. Our decision to go with a thirdperson view was thus born out of necessity.



"ONE CORE PART OF SPLATOON IS THE ABILITY TO GRASP THE OVERALL PICTURE OF THE BATTLE AS IT UNFOLDS"

The E3 demo only featured one gun, but others were shown in the trailer. How can you make a sniper rifle, for instance, work in a game where you win by shooting the ground rather than enemies?
In Japanese, we call this weapon the Charge Shot. You charge up and hurl ink over a large distance. You can certainly use this to take out far-off opponents, but it can also be used to extend your painted territory much farther. The ability to paint the ground is a really important feature for all the weapons.

What other uses of the GamePad's screen did you consider for the game? Or did you always feel that the permanent map display was the best way to use it?
One of the core parts of *Splatoon* is the ability to grasp the overall picture of the battle as it unfolds moment by moment, and to be able to take this into account to plan your next move. We felt that letting players always be able to see the map on the GamePad and be able to select it – that is, to touch it at any moment – was really the best choice for the game.

Players can aim with analogue sticks instead of the gyroscope. How have you balanced those two against each other, given that one is better for faster movement, the other for faster aiming?
The gyroscope is used for things like vertical aiming and fine adjustments. Tilting the GamePad a little makes for larger camera movements, so you can aim quickly without having to make large movements yourself. The analogue sticks are used to make larger horizontal changes in direction. It's not something that's been done before, so it might take a bit of getting used to, but in a game like this, where players can move around virtually unrestricted, we feel that it's the best control scheme.



Maps feature plenty of ways to get a height advantage – not just ramps and ladders. You can swim up walls in squid form, just so long as you've inked them



HISASHI NOGAMI
PRODUCER, NINTENDO



GamePad maps can feel like a copout, but having one here is invaluable, a quick glance showing who's winning and where you need to focus on



DEVIL'S THIRD

Developer Valhalla Game Studios **Format** Wii U **Release** 2014



TOMONOBU ITAGAKI
CHIEF TECHNICAL OFFICER, VALHALLA GAME STUDIOS

Zelda and *Splatoon* may have stolen the headlines, but *Devil's Third* was perhaps the most surprising of all Nintendo's E3 announcements. A shooter/brawler hybrid from **Tomonobu Itagaki**, designer of *Ninja Gaiden* and creator of *Dead Or Alive*, it was first greenlit by now-defunct publisher THQ.

Nintendo seems an unlikely partner for this type of game. What convinced you it was the best company to work with?
I just wanted to work with people who loved *Devil's Third* with all they had. And Nintendo said to me, "Let's shape *Devil's Third* into a great game together!" And there's one more thing I want to say. To you all, I might appear as a guy that just kind of fits with wearing sunglasses or gambling while having some drinks, while some people view Nintendo as a company only interested in making family-friendly videogames featuring Nintendo characters. But it's dangerous to measure the value of things [or] try to predict the future with such a stereotyped mindset. All you'll get are weak answers.

So, then, how can we find out the real personality of a man or a company? Let me tell you the answer: heart. A company is just a collection of people. Therefore, a company must also have a heart. I'm working on *Devil's Third* with a Nintendo producer, Mr [Hitoshi] Yamagami. And alongside Mr Yamagami there are many other fantastic artists and artisans at Nintendo. Every day we are going back and forth, arguing and laughing. What else could be more exciting? Only this passion can create a new future and great games, you see?



You've been known for your work on Xbox, and to a lesser extent PlayStation, during the past decade or so. What's it like making a game on Wii U?
When I first announced I would make a game for Xbox, I was asked hundreds of times, 'Why would you make a game for a console like Xbox? Are you out of your mind?' Now we have this nice convenient tool called the Internet and all those questions from interviewers and my answers are archived. I encourage you to go take a look at them.

Now, I have a question for you. Do you know anyone who would ask me right now, 'Why did you make games for Xbox?' No one, right? Because you guys living in 2014 understand that I made the right choice. Whatever, let me put it a different way. All I do is make games, for videogame fans, on the hardware I want to work with.

You worked on SNES games at the start of your career. How does Nintendo today differ from then?
Nintendo is now much more open than in those days. The hardware team, software team, everything – even management.

Think about it. Two decades have passed. It'd be strange if things didn't change, don't you think? Now, together with Valhalla Game Studios, Nintendo is working on the development, launch and operation of a totally new game. Nobody can stop those who have passion. Now's the time to show our stuff!

Your games are notoriously difficult. How do you intend to balance that with Nintendo's more family-oriented audience?
There are two different cases: sometimes Nintendo will say, "We'll leave everything to you, Itagaki," and then sometimes they'll say, "Whoah, this is too difficult! Enough is enough!" [Laughs] See? Development is fun, isn't it? Working on different things every day; thinking differently every day. But it's easier said than done. There is one thing that never changes, though. It is [the desire] to make a game of a new genre for people to enjoy – that passion. For that passion and for that goal, it will often lead us to argue, and it will often lead us to embrace. And then we'll go for a drink!



Itagaki is known for his trademark brand of melee combat, but shooters are a new avenue for him







Devil's Third has used three different engines during production; the finished game will be powered by Unreal Engine 3

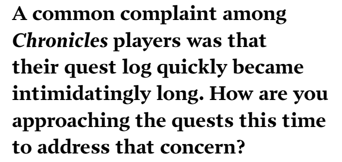
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES X

Developer Monolith Soft **Format** Wii U **Release** 2015

Xenoblade Chronicles was one of Wii's great surprises, with beautiful graphics, snappy realtime combat in a genre known for turn-based battles and, thanks to a fine localisation, an oddly British tone despite its Japanese origins. *Xenoblade Chronicles X* looks to build on that success with HD visuals, a vast game world and pilotable vehicles.

The games you make are set in gigantic worlds. How have you managed the transition to HD resolution?
Xenoblade Chronicles X is the first HD project for Monolith Soft, so instead of setting a number of hard-to-achieve targets, we are working on steadily building up key skills. Our goal with this game is first to lay the groundwork for [our] HD game development, so as to not overreach ourselves and cause problems.

Why are you moving away from a class-based system for player characters? Do you feel that previous games have been too restrictive in that regard?
The player's character in *Xenoblade Chronicles X* isn't one with a fixed personality like in any of our previous games – it's more of an avatar for the player. We decided that this setup would be the best in terms of this game's system. Therefore, if the main character is an avatar for the player, then of course they shouldn't be restricted in terms of class, gender or appearance.



"WE'VE PUT SOME IMPORTANT FEATURES RELATING TO THE GAME SYSTEM AND YOUR OBJECTIVES ONTO THE GAMEPAD"

You're including vehicles to pilot this time, which suggests the world is very large indeed. How big is it compared to *Chronicles*?
Dolls, which are what we call these vehicles, are roughly five times the size of a person, so to get the same feel as *Xenoblade Chronicles* while using a Doll, the map would probably need to be five times as large. It's actually even bigger than that, but we've made sure to design *Xenoblade Chronicles X* so that players can still feel comfortable navigating the world, despite its vast size.

A common complaint among *Chronicles* players was that their quest log quickly became intimidatingly long. How are you approaching the quests this time to address that concern?
When you take on quests, the objectives and relevant people will be displayed on the map. We've also included a number of other features to help with quests, so it should be a much more user-friendly experience than *Xenoblade Chronicles*.

How are you using the GamePad? How do its various features suit the sort of games you make?
We decided that it would be perfect to use as a navigation device, in the same way that a lot of tablet computers are. We've put some important features relating to the game system and your objectives in the game onto the GamePad, so I feel that this should create a very user-friendly experience for players.

Pilotable mechs, or Dolls, are new to the series, and a vital addition given the game world's size





TETSUYA TAKAHASHI
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, MONOLITH SOFT



The game begins with two alien races battling in near Earth orbit, leaving the planet in ruins and forcing humanity to evacuate to the stars

SUPER SMASH BROS

Developer Sora Ltd **Format** 3DS, Wii U **Release** October (3DS), winter 2015 (Wii U)



MASAHIRO SAKURAI
GAME DIRECTOR, SORA LTD



Robin and Lucina will be more familiar to western audiences than *Fire Emblem* series stablemates Roy and Marth were in the early 2000s. While Chrom was rumoured, he is not a playable character

Nintendo's big firstparty hitter this Christmas has been a long time coming: Satoru Iwata announced the game at E3 2011. New additions to the 15-year-old formula include Amiibo figurine integration and Mii fighters with customisable movesets.

The fighting game has changed a lot since the release of *Super Smash Bros Brawl* – games have become more intricate and more complex than ever before. How has that affected your development of the Wii U version?
I myself haven't been conscious of any great change in the fighting game genre since *Brawl* was released. Although it is a genre in which things like strategy are absolutely fascinating, I have known for some 20-odd years now that they are complex, exclusive games that tend to turn off people who would otherwise be able to enjoy them.

***Brawl* was not universally adopted by tournament players, some of whom felt it was imbalanced and went back to playing *Melee*. What have you done to ensure that doesn't happen again?**
I think the popularity of *Melee* rested fundamentally on the game's speed. The dazzling exchange of skills was the game's most exhilarating aspect and the rough edges in terms of the game's balance went mostly unnoticed. Even though the dynamic range of the characters was limited, the game somehow made its mark, even with hardcore fans of the genre.

Melee's controls were, however, quite complicated and very tiring if the player really got into it in a serious way. This made the game less accessible for novice players and it basically ended up becoming a *Smash Bros* game for hardcore fighting fans. I personally regret that, because I originally intended the *Smash Bros* series to be for players who couldn't handle such highly skilled games.

If tournament popularity was the most important consideration, then I think we would create a *Smash Bros* game that included a multitude of fast moves with complicated controls. However, I believe this is actually the greatest shortcoming of fighting games at present, and that is the reason why I don't do it.

Games aimed at casual users, such as *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit*, reinvigorated the market and their success lay behind Wii's popularity, [so] we had to make sure that *Brawl* would also be fun for first-time players. We also had to make sure that everyone could use the controls, such as holding the Wii Remote sideways. As a result of these considerations, overall *Brawl* is a rather tame game; this had its advantages, but it also took away some of the excitement.

While there's a lot of enthusiasm for tournaments on the one hand, there are also users who just give up on these sorts of games because they can't handle the complexity and speed. While other fighting games continue to work on honing this tournament aspect, I think that we need to move in a direction in which there is more of a focus on inexperienced gamers. Companies that release products that target a very vocal, visible group of gamers tend to receive good reactions and they may feel good about it, but I think that we have to pay special attention to the less vocal, not so visible group of players, or else games will just fade away.



Some fighters are gaining custom special moves this time around, but these won't be available With Anyone online to avoid nasty surprises



There are so many other games out there which are geared to tournaments. It is important for us, however, to maintain the game's status as a kind of 'rough' party game in which anyone can play without feeling too much pressure over winning or losing. We therefore want to keep a nice balance in which a wide variety of events can occur in the game, some of them quite outrageous. With this, *Smash Bros* isn't just a fighting game, it is an opponent-based action game.

The most important thing is that the games have breadth and depth, since we would like them to be popular with both novices and hardcore gamers. We think that people who aren't so good at turning the tables and coming back from behind can still get enjoyment out of the [new] game, even if they turn off items and Smash Balls.

Although the pace of the game had to be lowered compared to *Melee* in order to achieve this balance, we have managed to keep the dynamism because we didn't have to gear towards novice players like we did with *Brawl*. In fact, we recreated all characters almost from scratch. Also, I feel on a personal level that this game is more interesting than the three previous games in the series.

What have you done to ensure Amiibo integration – opponents summoning another fighter to assist them, for instance – doesn't threaten that balance?
Amiibo can't be used online in With Anyone matches. Amiibo can be added to friend battles or to local-play battles, where you get together with other people and fight based on rules that everyone understands and has agreed to. The general way to use Amiibo would be to have them fight each other, have two-on-two battles between Amiibo and players, or one-on-one duels between a player and an Amiibo. Whichever way you choose, victory or defeat will be determined by how the Amiibo has been trained.

Fighting games are notoriously unwelcoming to newcomers. How have you catered for them in terms of mechanics and tutorials?
We have, of course, leaned towards simpler controls. *Smash Bros* is also incredibly diverse if you play it seriously; the gameplay will be completely different depending on which stage you play, even if the players and the characters are the same, and the appearance of just one random item can change the flow of the game enormously.

"WE'VE MANAGED TO KEEP THE DYNAMISM BECAUSE WE DIDN'T HAVE TO GEAR TOWARDS NOVICES LIKE WITH BRAWL"

Obviously, this isn't suitable for tournaments, where individuals pit precise skills against each other, because you can't compare results based on a field or track whose size or distance keep changing every time you play. When it comes to board or card games, however, everyone's on a level playing field, even though the dice or cards may vary.

This fusion of skill and luck is what *Smash Bros* is all about. We want to leave the [tournament or skills focus] to other titles and strive for a game that doesn't end up being too one-sided as a result of this latter aspect. Our aim is to create a game the player can enjoy and laugh about even if they lose.

We don't want to create a situation, however, in which players at a beginner level suddenly become the strongest either; this type of handicapping is better suited to *Mario Kart*. The best scenario would be that strong players who handle the controls best can win the game, but luck also plays an important role.

You're making one of very few Wii U games we've seen recently that doesn't make specific use of the GamePad. Why is that?
Basically, we did it out of necessity. We had to provide a level playing field... and we didn't want the player with the GamePad to have an advantage, so our plan is to make it impossible to use the GamePad constantly during matches. That doesn't mean, however, that there aren't GamePad-specific controls.

Smash Bros may have a greater focus on seasoned players, but that doesn't mean it has lost any of its penchant for slapstick





While *Brawl* (above) upgraded the series' visuals, it courted a different audience to *Melee* (top). The Wii U edition is designed to be accessible, but less offputtingly so

YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD

Developer Good-Feel, Nintendo SPD **Format** Wii U **Release** First half of 2015



TAKASHI TEZUKA
PRODUCER, NINTENDO





ETSUNOBU EBISU
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, GOOD-FEEL



When *Yoshi's Woolly World* launches, the game that started it all will be 20 years old. But while this series is still firmly wedded to the *Yoshi's Island* formula, *Kirby's Epic Yarn* creator Good-Feel has sought ways to refresh it, such as series-first co-op.

What does it mean to make a *Yoshi* game in 2014?
Takashi Tezuka For each game we [at Nintendo] have made in the series, we've tried to achieve all that we wanted to do, so that we wouldn't be left with any regrets. Having said that, there have been times when we haven't been able to include something due to the technical limitations at the time.

For example, multiplayer is something we can do now because of the leap in hardware performance brought about by Wii U. We've also always wanted to show the enemies and objects in a more realistic way. We're certainly using the hardware to its limits to make the wool look as good as it does here.

We've been able to do these things by making our development environment more efficient and user friendly than in the past, particularly in terms of level design.

How has adding co-op affected your approach to designing levels?
TT The co-operative multiplayer mode is definitely something we want players to experience, but at heart this is a singleplayer game, and the levels are being designed with a focus on the single player. Using these designs as our base, we're making further adjustments so that multiplayer will be even more fun, while at the same time making sure not to lose the original singleplayer enjoyment. That's our approach.



Strip away the visuals and this is still very much a *Yoshi's Island* game, end-of-level bonus ring and all

Other recent Nintendo co-op platformers have been gently competitive as well. Will that be the case with *Woolly World*, too?
TT Multiplayer can broadly be divided into co-operative and competitive types. There's big demand for each and I believe we have be careful to cater to both of them. Ideally, we aim not to make these separate modes, but allow players to choose their preferences naturally as they are playing. For this game, we've limited multiplayer to two players and left the choice up to them whether holding the other player in Yoshi's mouth should be used competitively or co-operatively.

With the woollen feel of the world, we also anticipate that more small children will play the game with others in their family, so while it would be easy just to focus on competitive play and put in a results screen showing who won and lost, we think it's much more appropriate in this game to be able to enjoy competitive elements within the design of a co-operative experience.

How has the leap to HD affected the way you work?
Etsunobu Ebisu One of the important themes of this game is the look of the assets. Thanks to the increase in resolution, we've also been able to make these look a lot more realistic. However, there's now more things than ever that we can do thanks to the increase in hardware specs, and so there's a lot more trial-and-error going on, meaning that of course the costs have gone up too. We've also had to take measures, such as assigning someone to work specifically with shaders, to ensure the quality of the textures and the overall appearance of the assets.



HYRULE WARRIORS

Developer Omega Force, Team Ninja, Nintendo SPD **Format** Wii U **Release** Out now (JP), September 19 (EU), 26 (NA)

Koei Tecmo and Omega Force have applied famous names to the *Musou* series before – *Dynasty Warriors Gundam Reborn* launched for European PS3s in July – but *Hyrule Warriors* is a departure for Nintendo. It's pure fan service, letting players take not just Link, but characters drawn from across *Zelda*'s 28-year history, into the *Musou* series' pitched battles.

Many of the fighters you've revealed so far have been female – an approach that many would like to see more of from the industry. How important is it to you to have a good gender balance in the games you make?
Yosuke Hayashi We weren't specifically considering gender when selecting the characters. We simply looked at the most memorable characters from the *Zelda* series and found that many of them were female. Maybe the main character, Link, being male helps make the women he meets in the series stand out more.



"WE SIMPLY LOOKED AT THE MEMORABLE CHARACTERS FROM THE SERIES AND FOUND THAT MANY WERE FEMALE"

Some characters from the *Zelda* series seem better suited to a *Warriors* game than others. Link, with his Master Sword, is a natural fit, but parasol-toting bug collector Agitha perhaps less so. Who has been the hardest character to design in that sense?
YH Actually, it was Link with his sword. For other weapons and characters that users have never played with in the past titles, we simply had to cast [our] ideas into shape. On the other hand, however, people will inevitably compare Link to their experiences with him in the main *Zelda* series. For this reason, he was the character that we spent the most time with, and that needed the most revisions.

There's a comical element to the game – the size of the bombs, for example, and how many of them Link throws at once. How important is it to convey to the player that *Hyrule Warriors* has a less serious tone than they might expect from a *Zelda* game, and how else do you plan to convey that?
YH There are always humorous elements included in every *Zelda* title. Although there are lots of serious scenes too, all of the games have a lighthearted atmosphere on some level. Of course, we think such elements are important for *Hyrule Warriors* and that fans would expect them, which is why we included Cuccos in the game.
Eiji Aonuma The bombs in H*yrule Warriors* were not particularly created to be comical. They were made like this because there can be so many characters filling the screen at once that we wanted to really give the bomb a bigger presence. I think players who know the series very well will appreciate why we did this. This mixture of serious and comical elements is something that you'll see across the whole *Zelda* series.

The *Warriors* series is perhaps the most prolific in all videogames. How are you able to make games so quickly, so efficiently, without compromising on quality?
YH I think it's because of the game engine. Many people probably don't know about it, since it's not provided to other companies like Unreal Engine, but we actually have our own engine at Koei Tecmo. With our highly experienced developers in addition to that, we are able to develop lots of great titles. ■

Hyrule Warriors is no mere button-basher, with crafting, levelling and character-specific skill trees



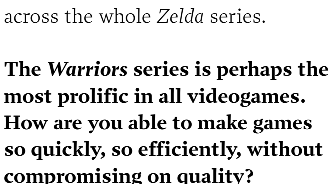


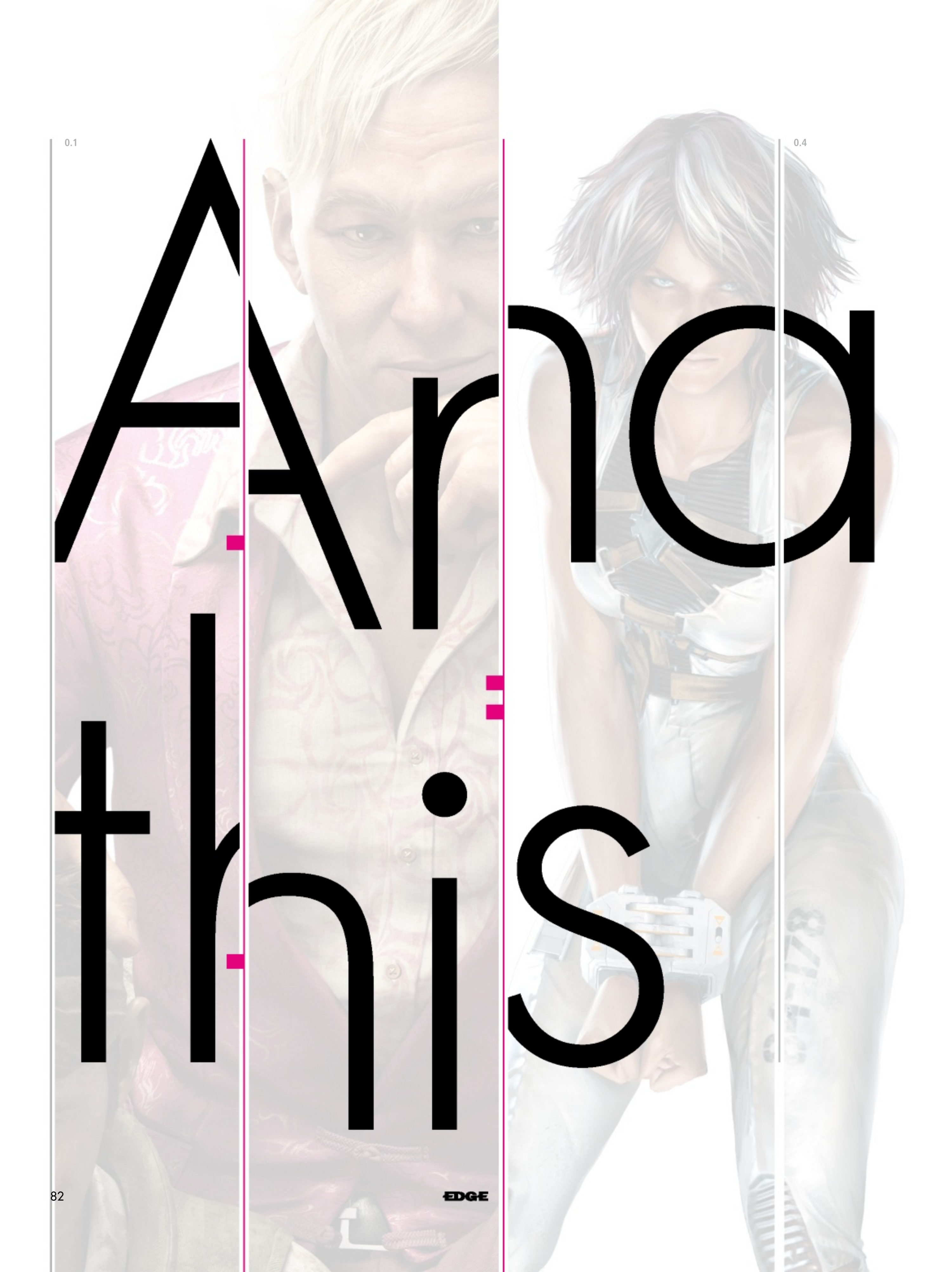
YOSUKE HAYASHI
DEVELOPMENT PRODUCER, KOEI TECMO

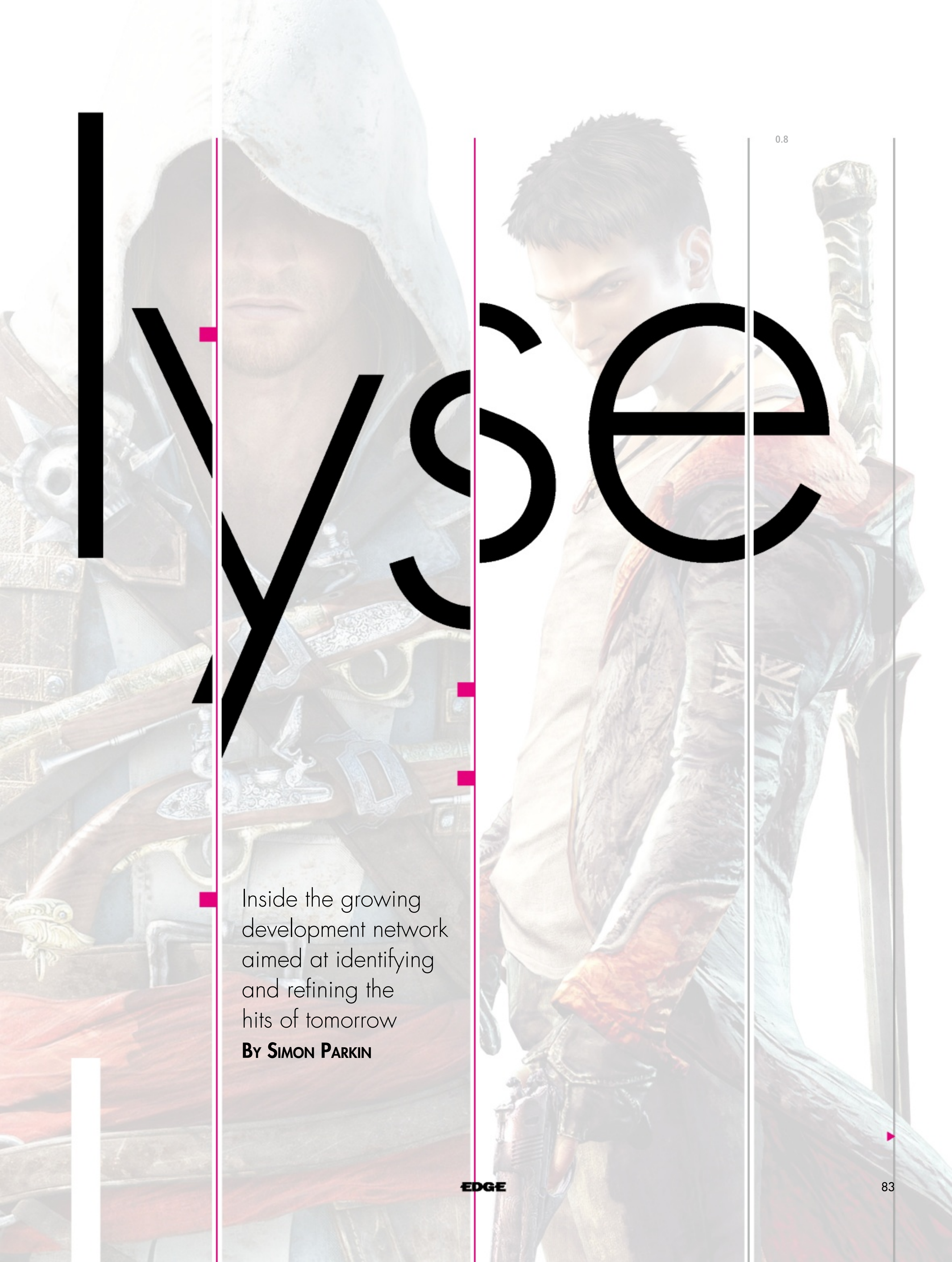


EIJI AONUMA
ZELDA FRANCHISE SUPERVISOR, NINTENDO






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Inside the growing development network aimed at identifying and refining the hits of tomorrow

By Simon Parkin

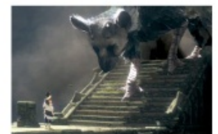
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1.1 MMOG design taps into human psychology to ensure player retention and thus subscriptions or item sales



1.2 *Far Cry 4*'s design, like many of its peers, has been iterative. Given the costs involved, it has to appeal



1.3 Development costs can spiral when a game stalls, a scenario that early advice is in part meant to prevent



2.1 Geoffrey Zatkin's degree in psychology first proved useful when he joined the original *EverQuest* team. 1.1 It's a type of game that, perhaps more overtly than any that before it, employs psychological hooks to inspire people to take up residence in its world. Since 2006, Zatkin has taken a less visible role in the industry, but one that's no less influential. His company, 3.1 EEDAR, is an unknown to most players, yet it works with more than 90 per cent of videogame publishers, evaluating and guiding big-budget videogames.

The nature of its scrutiny can be hard to define. EEDAR owns numerous videogame-related patents bearing arcane descriptions such as Characteristics Of Players Systems & Methods For Analysing Electronically Embodied Games, and Systems And Methods For Evaluating, Classifying And Predicting Game Trends Using Clustered Pattern Recognition. Simply put, however, a publisher will often come to EEDAR with a dozen or so videogames it's interested in making. EEDAR will then analyse the designs, scrutinise the market and advise which of the hypothetical games seems likely to secure the highest review scores and the greatest profits.

"Game development is expensive, and publishers always have more games they'd like to make than they have the resources to," says Zatkin. "A successful game can be financially rewarding, but release enough unsuccessful games, or even a single expensive [failure], and you could put your company in financial jeopardy. It is our job to supply a publisher with both the quantitative data and the qualitative analysis to make those difficult decisions intelligently." EEDAR, in other words, is a modern-day seer, one that looks not to the stars but to cold, hard data, and then advises publishers where to place their bets.

This is just the first in a quiver of newly minted data-driven services designed to help developers and publishers make more informed choices and more successful games. At almost every stage of the modern videogame's gestation, there is now a group offering to lend their refining expertise. Story, systems, user interface, even the colour of box art: all have been tested and re-tested, and iterated upon to offer the best possible chance of success. Today, when a videogame can represent a multimillion-dollar investment, it will often go through multiple iterations before it's announced. One anonymous insider revealed the version of 1.2 *Far Cry 4* shown at this year's E3 was, in fact, the fourth attempt at the game. Who knows how many versions of 1.3 *The Last Guardian* exist in the development hell multiverse?

"Many factors influence the success of a game, and companies should be examining these factors before and during the game's development lifecycle," says Zatkin. "Is the game conceptually new? Does it innovate? Do consumers like the idea? How does the game measure up against competitor titles? Will consumers have fun playing it? Is there a core value proposition that the game offers to the customer? Can marketing communicate that value proposition? Will consumers buy the game? How is game quality tracking throughout development?"

For Zatkin, finding answers to these questions in data and analysis brings a form of scientific rigour and care to the creative process that, with so many hands involved, can quickly become something of a chaotic wager.

Once the viability of a game has been established, it's the user research company's turn to shape it. 3.2 Player Research is an organisation that aims to help developers make better games by applying its staff's knowledge of psychology, neuroscience and human computer interaction. It boasts that all the iOS titles it has contributed to have earned a coveted position on the front page of the App Store, while its console and non-mobile games include number-one-selling and BAFTA-nominated titles.

2.0



2.1 Geoffrey Zatkin, CPO of EEDAR



2.2 Player Research founder Graham McAllister



2.3 Audrey Laurent-André, Ubisoft Editorial lab team



2.4 Sébastien Odasso, Ubisoft Editorial lab team

PLAN AHEAD

For Zatkin, the most common mistake that a developer makes when embarking on a new project is to fail to consider what makes a successful game early on in the process. "It may sound obvious, but players instinctively compare the games they play with other games that they have played. So you have to ensure that your core mechanics are tight, your art is appealing, your content is compelling, and your game is, ultimately, enjoyable." Beyond the mechanisms of the game itself, there's a host of external factors a team often fails to consider. "A game must have the right marketing to communicate the strongest 'hooks' to make sure people are interested. Then you just consider the right distribution method for the game, the best price or monetisation strategy, and the support system so the people continue to enjoy the experience once they have bought your game."

2.2 "The field of game user research is relatively new," says founder **Graham McAllister**. "But for a game to stand the best chance of becoming a success, these techniques should be applied at all stages of development. It should be an incorporated segment working across an entire project, from day one to release, or even beyond, if it's a game as a service."

This user testing work takes multiple forms, from expert reviews, in which staff assess a game using internal frameworks, through to iterative playtests, where real players (volunteers drawn from a database, who range in age from three to 70) are recruited to play the game and provide feedback. "Finding the right players is essential," says McAllister. "If you get the wrong players, then you'll get the wrong findings and take your game in potentially the wrong direction. We recommend developers never use friends or family for playtesting. It's wasting everyone's time."

For McAllister, it's essential that developers apply scientific rigour to their designs. "In terms of general mistakes that developers make, top of the list is allowing assumptions to remain untested until very late in development. Gathering objective evidence as early as possible is crucial. Devs become very close to a game having worked on it for months or years. This means during playtests they may only see what they want to see, using their previous experience and knowledge to bias what they find."

While the value of a fresh, outsider's perspective on a game may be crucial to correct wrong turns in the development process, many of the world's larger game studios have recently formed their own internal teams, designed to apply this scientific framework to the development

2.3 process. **Audrey Laurent-André** and
2.4 **Sébastien Odasso** run Ubisoft's Parisian editorial user research group, AKA lab team, a collection of almost 20 designers who organise and watch live playtests on any of the company's various projects around its global network of studios.

"For instance, someone on the *Assassin's Creed* team might pose the question: 'Will the new game be clearly understood by newcomers to the series?'" says Laurent-André. "It's then a case of selecting a potential tester, finding out what kind of games they play, the platforms they play on most regularly and so on. We have a diverse pool for all types of players around the world. It takes us less than two days to organise a test with any group of specific types of player."

While user testing was at one point a somewhat loose part of the Ubisoft process, Odasso says, the lab team was founded to ensure it forms part of "the very DNA of a project". In fact, usability tests occur every two to three weeks. As well as finding out whether a player connects with a game's story, setting or systems, the lab team also gathers more granular data. "Let's say one of the development teams wants to check that a specific boss fight isn't too hard," says Laurent-André. "We record various statistics during a player's session, such as the amount of time to completion, the number of deaths incurred and so on. These things help us quantify challenge. For example, the designer may have intended the player to defeat the boss in 20 minutes. If it takes an experienced player an hour, during which he dies 30 times and leaves reporting a feeling of frustration or misunderstanding, then we know we have a problem."

To improve consistency across so many tests, Ubisoft now assigns a tester from the lab to each title, someone who follows the game across its gestation. "For instance, we have one coordinator who runs all of the testing for *The Division*," Odasso explains. "He is able to follow the differences between versions of the game and, through the process, build up a good understanding of the kind of things that the team wants to know. The deeper the knowledge on the project, the more efficient the methodology."

Odasso himself has a background in neuroscience and neurophysiology. He was trained in perception-based user tests – or, in other words, versions of the Pepsi challenge. "The food industry didn't excite me," he says. "I saw an opportunity ▶

3.0



3.1 EEDAR has worked with the likes of Rockstar, Microsoft, SOE, 2K, Crystal Dynamics and Activision



3.2 Player Research claims that 100 per cent of the iOS games for which the company has provided user testing data have made it to the front page of the App Store



3.3 Agency bills itself as offering an external eye on projects, its insights born from experience



3.4 VMC offers quality assurance testing, ensuring that games and software perform as they should

4.0



4.1 *Assassin's Creed IV* included feedback systems within the game to gather players' subjective opinions



4.2 Agency is working with Tale Of Tales on *Sunset*, a firstperson narrative about a maid and a revolution



4.3 Online features are tough to test in a way that reflects real-world conditions, and thus present unique issues



to come to Ubisoft to do the kind of work that I was interested in."

Odasso has been at Ubisoft for six years now and, during that time, has seen a huge amount of change in the manner and rigour with which games are tested. "Usability tests were first carried out at Ubisoft in 2001," he explains. "Since then, we've been constantly improving our methodology. When I arrived, there were five of us in the lab. We've quadrupled in size since then. Our development process has become increasingly orientated around the player's response to a game during its development."

Laurent-André, by contrast, trained as a designer and programmer. But she saw a rare opportunity in analytics. "I don't think I'm *not* doing design per se," she says. "I'm not designing things as such, but an understanding of game design is crucial to the job. You have to understand why players interact with gameplay loops, why loops are behaving in the way they should, why players aren't satisfied, why they don't understand something, and why they don't feel rewarded. It's important to have people who are experienced in user research, but we also need people who have a deeper understanding of all the design stuff. It's a component of game design, even if it's not game design in the traditional sense."

Some of the challenge for any team involved in user testing is separating the objective data from users' evaluations. "If a player repeatedly fails one section of a game, then that is hard data," says Odasso. "We usually see a great deal of correlation between players' performance on this
4.1 hard data. For example, on ***Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag***, 80 per cent of usability issues were common among all players during tests. But when we ask players for subjective evaluation of what they like or dislike about a game, there can be a great deal of variation."

Such varying feedback can be confusing for a team. For this reason, another type of freelance service in the game-improving economy has sprung up during the past decade: the consultant critic. It's a profession that attracts many ex-journalists. They may not bring pure objectivity, but they do offer expertise in the area of professional reviewing. Former
5.1 **Edge** columnist **N'Gai Croal** left his journalism career to found Hit Detection in 2009, where he offers a critic's eye on projects during development. Zatkin's EEDAR also offers a 'mock review' service.

"Mock reviews, at a base level, give you a heads-up on how the product will be reviewed when it finally hits the press," says Zatkin. "They independently point out specific strengths and weaknesses in the title, which might be different from what is internally perceived to be the game's strengths and weaknesses."

As well as giving the game's creators a different perspective, larger publishers use this information to highlight the game's strengths in marketing materials. Zatkin: "Mock reviews can also provide last-minute polish suggestions, can also give an extra heads-up on any technical issues going into launch, and can point out any areas of the title that might be focused on for DLC or even a possible sequel. There's a lot you can learn by letting an experienced thirdparty take a look at the game before it launches."

Some believe the 'mock review' comes much too late in the process to be of genuine use. "Usually, the reviewer is brought in when it's too late to make meaningful changes, and often reviewers can be quite literate about their likes and dislikes and how things feel, but don't
5.2 provide design criticism," says **Leigh Alexander**, another erstwhile **Edge**
3.3 columnist who, in 2014, founded **Agency**
5.3 with one-time **Edge** staffer **Ste Curran**. "They can tell a developer something's not working, but it's unusual for a mock review to shed light on why."

Agency was formed to close the gap between the game a team wants to make and the game that's actually being made, and, to date, has primarily worked with smaller studios, such as Tale Of Tales.

"Traditional commercial development has a ton of systemic problems," says Alexander. "Most commonly, a game's disparate components don't cohere in

5.0



5.1 N'Gai Croal, founder and CEO of Hit Detection



5.2 Leigh Alexander, Agency co-founder



5.3 Ste Curran, Agency co-founder



5.4 Ben Wibberley, games director, VMC

BUG OUT

During the QA process the testing team will compile a list of bugs, from game-breaking issues to quirks in design that personally irk the tester. These subjective complaints can, according to VMC's Wibberley, create conflict between the tester and the designer. "Generally, for any game company, there's a set process in terms of who decides whether a 'bug' will be fixed or not, but usually it's a joint decision based on responsibility," he says. "If a bug genuinely breaks a game to [a point] where the player cannot progress any further or is kicked from the game for any reason, then the severity rating will determine that the bug needs to be addressed and fixed. For other issues, it comes down to severity, the likelihood of whether or not the player will find the issue, and whether it simply functions as designed."

that they don't serve one another as well as they could. This tends to be because everyone is working closely on their individual area, and the person in charge mainly wants to make sure everyone finishes their bit on time and within budget. There is no all-seeing eye to see this lack of cohesiveness from a good distance. Likewise, often people working on a game start to feel unsure about whether it will work, but they don't have the ability to raise their concerns, either because they have milestones to meet or because development inherently involves compromises. Getting everybody on the same page, helping ensure there's a vision in place that everyone can see clearly and feels passionately about, means that projects will be well-scoped and goals clearly identified before the investment in full development is underway."

Like Player Research, Agency's work is broadly systematic and logical. The company delivers diagnoses that can be kept alongside other design documents. But Agency tailors the nature of its consultancy to the needs of the developer. "With Tale Of Tales, we were hired to help them meet their goal of making a game that could reach a bigger audience," says Alexander. Agency then worked with the team to create a relatively mainstream design vocabulary for the forthcoming

4.2 ***Sunset***, as well as to define the language used when discussing the game in public.

It can be difficult to test quantitatively if a game's goal is simply to provide 'fun', though. "Games are unique as an industry in terms of software development in this

5.4 respect," says **Ben Wibberley**, a director

3.4 at **VMC**, a company that offers quality assurance testing both before and after release. "It's extremely difficult to quantify the fun factor in a game. You cannot automate experience. That's where QA (quality assurance) can step in with calculable feedback on things such as balance, flow and progression."

The business of QA, the final component in the modern testing machinery, is crucial to ensure that a game functions as it should, aside from its artistic merit or intent. During the past few years, the job has expanded. In many cases, particularly with games that exist as an ongoing proposition, there is work to be done post-release. Games as diverse as *Brink, Titanfall, Grand Theft*

4.3 *Auto V* and ***Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*** have all fallen at the final hurdle when it comes to online functionality, with issues such as disconnections and, in some cases, debilitating crashes.

"The industry has seen some huge titles fail on public launch," Wibberley says. "Simply put, this is because there are issues that cannot be identified in a QA lab. The only way they can be seen is by testing in a live environment. Many game companies try to do this with public beta tests, but unfortunately that does not hit to the root of what will cause games to fail at launch, since primarily these public betas are marketing exercises and are not geared to testing."

To help companies stress-test their big-budget online titles in a way that provides useful foresight, VMC has built a private global beta test network, a community of thousands of beta testers that enables it to test in a live situation, including checks on stress, usability and matchmaking.

Today, the work of these videogame scientists is perhaps better described as midwifery, a series of roles and systems built to rein in the chaos of ballooning development teams and safely deliver a game in its healthiest form. Videogames are artistic projects, but they're also functional products that need to work.

Still, there is a danger that endless market analysis and player testing can lead to homogeneity in the big-budget space. It's a problem that's echoed in Hollywood, where the financial risks involved to those funding the most expensive work also encourages creative conservatism. And, of course, there can be no preexisting market data for games that pioneer brand new spaces. When it comes to running the next *Minecraft* or *Dwarf Fortress* under the microscope, the videogame scientists can begin to look closer to fortune tellers, and their guess might be as good as anyone's. ■





Both *DmC* and *Remember Me* were tested by Player Research, proving that assessment is no guarantee of commercial success



Indie Labels

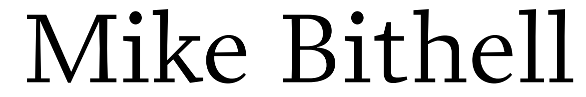
In **E**270, we touched on what 'indie' means today. Here, we invite five industry luminaries to dig deeper



Giordano Contestabile

Vice president, product management at Turning Point





Mike Bithell

Solo developer



Siobhan Reddy

Studio director, Media Molecule



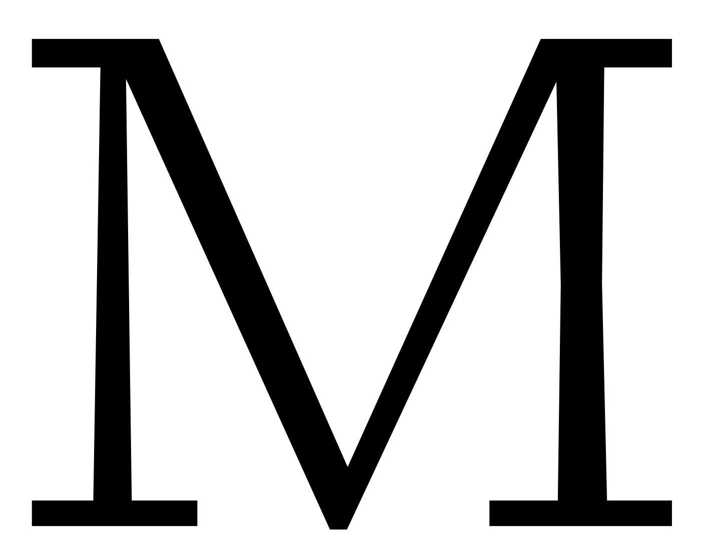
Nathan Vella

Co-founder and president, Capybara Games



David Braben

Founder and CEO, Frontier Developments



ore diverse, more creative and more adventurous than traditional game-making, indie development is frequently held up as the solution to the industry's problems. But is that really the case? As the boundaries blur – as self-owned studios find financial success and grow exponentially, tiny teams make enormous games, and big publishers form more small teams – what does the word 'indie' even mean any more? As if to make that point, the five people assembled here have wildly varying job descriptions. **Mike Bithell** made *Thomas Was Alone* by himself. **Nathan Vella**'s Capy employs two dozen people, while **David Braben**'s Frontier is making *Elite: Dangerous* with a team of 250. EA and Popcap alumnus **Giordano Contestabile** is a VP at Tilting Point, which provides support to mobile game developers. **Siobhan Reddy**, meanwhile, is studio director at Media Molecule, making games that embody what we used to call the indie spirit, despite being a Sony subsidiary.

Each of you represents a different aspect of the industry. How many of you still consider yourselves 'indie'?
David Braben Does that make me not indie? The grief I got when I said Frontier was indie…
Mike Bithell I'm so done with the word. I've actually been in the pub and stood up for you in that debate. People have no sense of history, that's all. Indie just means cool, right? That's all people mean when they say 'indie'.
Siobhan Reddy I actually don't understand what it means. I understand 'independently owned'; I understand 'independent spirit'. I get that… When there's a style more artistically free than another, made from an independently free place, then I think that's independent. It gets into, 'What type of game maker are you? Are you indie and cool? Or are you triple-A and the devil?' We sit in a weird world at Media Molecule where we've never been independent financially, but does that mean we're not cool?
MB You made *LittleBigPlanet*; you're cool. These days it means what you want it to mean. I think a few people used it with beautiful, punk games, and then a bunch of marketing departments noticed they were getting more coverage, and then it became a thing that got twisted.
Nathan Vella It's not as though there's some kind of absolute requirement for defining a style. We don't get really angry at people when they call their music hip-hop; we don't know what it means and we don't care what it means. I've listened to that genre of music for a million years, but I still have no idea what that means. I just associate the name with this massive bubble… You can't avoid [the marketing side] at all, you can't.
Giordano Contestabile It is a good marketing tool, something that gets you certain cred with certain publications.

Is there an independent spirit that goes beyond marketing?
DB I think the indie spirit [is] making a game for yourself, making a game for you to be proud of. To me, the antithesis of independence is focus tests. I'm not saying they're a bad thing, and if you're writing a game for an audience that isn't represented on the team, you need that sort of thing, but it can lead to, 'One guy couldn't [complete] it; let's make it a bit easier.' It means you don't know what you're doing in the first place.
MB But it's useful for telling you how well you're achieving the thing you are smugly trying to achieve because you're independent. I'm not changing my game because of how they're playing, but it's informing me how well I'm achieving the objectives I have set out. If I'm trying to make a frustrating game and everyone leaves with a massive grin on their face, then I will tweak that to achieve my goal better.
DB When someone has worked a lot on a game, you get close to it and think, 'This is too easy, I'm going to make it harder,' and it's a real problem with indie games. Focus tests can also be extremely valuable [to avoid that].
GC I think it's important to expose your game to people outside of the development team. You need someone to tell you your baby is ugly, whether that's a focus group, a friend or family.



Sackboy would not exist today without Sony's dollar, but his games capture a spirit that tends be called indie

Player feedback has never been more powerful. Microsoft's rethought its entire Xbox One offering because of it, every big game is focus tested, and Kickstarter lets players invest directly in a game. But what happens to the creator's vision?
GC Without speaking ill of Microsoft, their [recent] business ▶



“I try to explain Sword & Sworcery and I start by saying, ‘Have you played Mario?’ I hear myself and I want to punch myself in the face”

decisions were kind of common sense, and the audience highlighted that they were common sense. There was a problem to start with. That’s business, but creative is different; on the creative side, I think it’s your choice whether you get the player to tell you what to do or not. A strong creative mind usually doesn’t do that.
DB I think our design discussion forum is great. It’s really friendly and people suggest changes. It doesn’t mean that it’s a voting system, it’s just to make sure all the issues are covered. I think you can still have that sort of approach, [especially with Kickstarter] where you have a self-selecting group. We said, ‘Hey, this is what we want to make. This is how we’re going to make it. Are you in or out?’
MB And they’ve literally bought in.
DB That is a change… We sort of have a responsibility to make sure that we deliver something that’s as close to the vision that we put forward at the start as we can.
SR We tend to stay within the team at first to get to a point where the team is happy making what they’re making. Then it starts spreading out. Throughout *Tearaway* and *LBP* we would do… not so much ‘focus testing’, but getting to know the audience. I like the testing, but I don’t think you need to listen to all of it, and actually I want us to reserve the right to say, ‘Thank you, but we just really like that. And you might not like it, but we love it, so we’re going to keep it like that.’ Hopefully somebody, somewhere will agree with us.
NV I think making the game to appease everyone is the fast track to a complete bomb. [Graphic designer] Tibor Kalman said, basically, ‘When you make something no one hates, no one loves it’. When I first read that, I was a university student thinking, ‘Fuck everybody. I want to make what I want to make.’ The more I have thought about it, the more I believe [that]. We’ve never done the same genre [twice], never done a sequel. I think it’s important for us to make things that are not going to appease everyone.
SR I think that’s what is really strong – there is a Capy style, which comes from the personality within that group of people working on it. It’s the same with Molecule; it’s the collaboration of everybody coming together. [We shouldn’t] start watering that down with unknown people outside. We have a great relationship with Sony in that we’re never forced to take creative decisions. I think that would be the death of that relationship.

***Tearaway*'s quirky charm could easily have been polished out, but Media Molecule knows when to reject focus test feedback**

Are smaller and larger developers very much different today in terms of what they’re trying to achieve?
NV I have a friend who works very high up in the *COD* franchise. We sit on his patio, drink beers and talk about what development means. He’s talking about it on a $10 billion franchise, which is the most consistently villainised of any game that has ever existed, and I’m talking about it from a small studio having never worked anywhere else in games at all. And most of our problems and passions are completely aligned.
MB I think most stuff is unanimous. I’ve heard triple-A devs moaning about pretentious indie games, and I’ve heard indie devs moaning about *COD*, and neither of those groups have ever met each other. I don’t buy into this argument that indies are in any way more creative or idealistic. I worked at Blitz, and I poured just as much love into Wii games as I did into *Thomas Was Alone*. It didn’t matter what I was working on. I’ve seen exactly the same amount of passion on both sides of the fence. I bet the *COD* designers who stay late every night do so because they believe in it.
NV [Treyarch design director David] Vonderhaar works harder than anybody, and he gets death threats in the mail.
GC I used to get those for *Bejeweled*! When I was at EA, I met people from the *Madden* and *FIFA* teams. You think of those as massive, impersonal franchises, but then you meet the team and the game is absolutely the expression of the team.
SR I had the same experience encountering people who worked on *Madden*. I’m not into sport at all, but these people were so into it; they loved the sport and they loved the rules and they express it in just the same way that I love the games I love making.

***Thomas Was Alone* won a BAFTA for its narration. Bithell says working on writing alongside design improved his game’s story**

While interests and investment are similar among the creative people in the industry, how do you think games are perceived outside of that bubble?
DB There was this piece in The Sun recently, 'Games Are Worse For You Than Heroin', or some such headline. I remember getting quite angry about it. I had hoped we'd seen the end of articles like that, and hopefully it just reflects worse on the paper that's printed it than [it does on] gamers.
SR I think the mainstream press moves really quickly to focus on the negative. We have so many skills, and yet one of the things that we can't crack is being able to figure out how to talk to people who don't understand what games are.
DB There's a set of people who don't understand games. The games they've seen are from 20, 30 years ago. They remember them as repetitious, irritating, annoyingly difficult to play and that's it. That's certainly true of a lot of politicians. These people don't appreciate how big our industry is, how important it is. The bonkers headline 'PS3-Playing Dad Kills Baby' – I mean, for pity's sake! Maybe more than half the population plays games regularly. You wouldn't call it out as, 'Toaster-Using Dad Kills Baby'.
MB I look at a lot of this stuff and I think, 'This is just because a lot of old people don't know what videogames are'. But then Barack Obama was the first president who was a kid when videogames existed. I look at that and think, 'Maybe this is the shift'. You start to see stand-up comics incorporating a videogame bit into their act, or you see games mentioned in a TV drama. We're seeping in because the old people are dying.
NV The flip side of that, though, is that it still has the 'toys for boys' mentality attached to it. The end result is exactly the same for outsiders as it is with the older generation. That, I think, falls a lot on what Siobhan was saying about how we do a poor job of showing the breadth of it. I try to explain *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery* or *Super Time Force* to someone and I start by saying, 'Have you played *Mario*?' I hear myself and I want to punch myself in the face, because the second I do that, the association is 'toy', and immediately the cultural value seeps out.
GC One reason why the press can latch on to this kind of stuff is that we are the only industry where most of the marketing is about killing people. We're the only one. That's the most visible part, and it makes it very easy for them to do those hatchet jobs.
SR It's hard. We have *Tearaway*, which is charming and lovely, but there is still killing. We found it really tricky to come up with gameplay as immediate as pressing X and something [goes away].
GC Look at *The Sims*. The problem is that the interactions of *The Sims* are approximations of a romcom, and that's not as immediate as press X to kill, which is an approximation of killing. It's hard to make a fine and compelling game that doesn't involve press X to kill, and instead involves feelings and relationships.
MB This is what I've found with *Volume*. It has no 'kill' button and it ruins it.
SR In terms of genres and story and experience, I still think there is so much out there. I would love to see a lot of the games that are onto their fifth sequel just not continue and for those teams to try something new. Not because I think those games are bad, but because I would love to find a way for us all to be inspired to invent a bunch more genres. A lot of it can all just look the same from the outside, even when it's not the same at all when you get into it.



It wasn't so long ago that people were saying all games are the same. A few years on, we have incredible variety from hundreds of studios.
DB Well, we were very limited by shelf space in Game. It was hard to get more than one facing in a shop and it cost a lot of money, so it wouldn't stock games that were more than a few months old. Now we have infinite shelf space.
MB If you keep things small... With my new game, I need to sell 15,000 copies to get my money back, and it's going to be incredibly hard to *not* sell 15,000 copies. This is the ridiculousness of it.
DB But sometimes it's hard to sell that kind of number. You typically sell a tiny amount just to friends and family, or you sell really big if you capture people's imagination. Most of our games have recently done more than four million downloads. Once you get that rolling, the word of mouth carries it forward.



Capy's *Super Time Force* is bold, brash and loud, but also intricately systemic and seeped in '80s culture and NES-era homage

Will currently niche genres – games about social interaction, say – ever rise to take on the current blockbusters?
GC If you look at the billion-dollar franchises, it's shooters, *GTA* or sports, and all the market you see will stay around for those.
MB That excites me, because it's so *wrong*. It's true that's how things are right now, but if you look at any other media – books, TV, film – we don't live in a universe that's just action movies, or where all the books [are thrillers]. That means the opportunity's ▶

there. The idea of a Seth Rogen videogame? There's an audience that wants that.
DB Personally, I wouldn't care if *COD* didn't exist, because the industry would be so much fresher without it. I'm not here to criticise any individuals. But it has become, for me, very stale.
SR They're getting to the point where they've finessed something so well… When I was going through an FPS phase, I discovered how good it was. I was like, 'I understand why this is the one.' It's the one because it's actually the best; I found it the most enjoyable experience to play. And the same with playing *GTA* – it's just so well finessed. They all started somewhere and then they stuck with it until they were on to their n-teenth iteration.
DB The advantage for [studios like these] is they always have something to point at that is remarkably similar to the one they're about to make to justify the budget. With *GTAV*, they used the sales of *GTAIV*, and said, 'It'll be better.'
MB The old guard are kind of losing a certain amount of relevance in terms of the triple-A stuff. We have got a resurgence in people doing the things they want to be doing, and we also have this new generation of the [devs behind the] indie hits of the last ten years setting up studios, growing up.
DB There's also a missing piece of tech that will make a big difference to us, which is speech [recognition and generation]. We're getting ever closer technically. Killing something is a very easy interaction; social interactions are way harder. *The Last Of Us* did a very good job with performance capture and actors delivering it, but then you've got a narrow story that isn't very interactive. [It's] a long way off, but it will come.
NV I think the flip side of it is the technological component, but then there's also the pure craft component. *The Last Of Us* is an interesting one. Usually, you need a good story, you hire someone from Hollywood and they write the same garbage into a game. But you ask Neil [Druckmann, Naughty Dog creative director] and he writes what, in my opinion, is one of the better scripts for a videogame of all time. I think the way you solve the narrative problem in games is to either find good game writers and give them more power, or just get rid of the narrative entirely.

Is there really a narrative problem in games?
MB We are one of the only mediums that doesn't have the writer show up first. A producer may say, 'We need a Batman movie,' but the writer is the first creative on the project. The screenplay happens first, same with TV and everything. We decide we need a level in the Amazon, a level in the military base and then we then hire a writer to explain why that is happening.
DB There is another point to it, though. We're not really just a storytelling medium. I know some of the games we do are ways of telling stories, which is great. But you're also [an explorer] in the world. [Take] *Assassin's Creed*. You're simulating a guy climbing around, and you're thinking, 'I bet I can get up the top of that.'
NV To me, that still counts as narrative, and that's still very important. You talk to Patrice [Désilets, *Assassin's Creed* creator] about that game, and the thing he talks about before anything else is what he wants the player to feel, what they want to achieve.
MB It's simulation with narrative objective as well. That's the story that's been constructed. It feels emergent and it is. I'm sure there's stuff I do in *AC* that no one ever intended me to do, but it's still a written [design].
NV That's actually very much in line with my point. If you go out and hire a Hollywood writer, you lose that ability [for player-driven narrative], because they have no concept of this entire other space existing. *Below* has no text at all; you don't get told any type of story. You find it all yourself. That's something you can do in a videogame. But the narrative for *Below* is longer than any we've ever written.
SR You can't just come and get someone to write it for you. Our scripts are always written by whoever cares. But in some ways, we could probably get rid of the text and dialogue a lot of the time. What we've tried to do is guide someone through an experience. It's always been difficult to figure out how to do words, and how to bring the writer to the team. I actually really like our process in a way, because it does reflect how we make it – nothing works in a linear fashion.

GTAV demonstrates what's possible with iteration – and how budgets continue to grow at the highest end of development

MB On smaller projects, the writer is often the designer. I can think of two or three designers, myself included, who have had to learn to write because they were the people who *had* to write. This is why indie games are always celebrated for their stories; I don't think indie writers, or the people responsible for writing in indie games, are usually any better. Often a lot of us are worse than the triple-A equivalents. If the story wasn't working, I could just change it. I could make something more cohesive. I'm not that

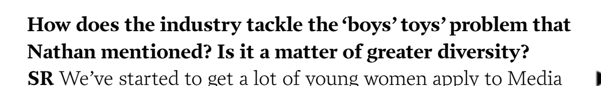


"I'm not that good, but because I had the freedom to lead the experience, I create the illusion of being a much better writer"

good, but because I had the freedom to lead the experience, I create the illusion of being a much better writer.
SR [As developers] we have to build a bunch of things, figure out a bunch of things and always in our mind we have to keep an idea of what the world is, what the story is and what the player's journey will be. I think that works pretty well in the way that we do it, but I think we could get better at it. When I think about hiring a Hollywood writer… When we look outside the industry to solve the problems, [you find] nobody works in exactly the same way, or works in the way where we do, from granular choices to high levels, to deleting everything and starting again. Very few processes have exactly that many different brains all working together, where a new idea one day can shift everything. It's a very different process. One of the reasons for why it's never going to be a completely black-and-white answer of how we improve writing in games is because every team will have their own tweak.
MB It's the end result that matters; there are multiple routes to the best solution.
GC One thing I'd like to change is that in every discussion like this, we end up comparing ourselves to the movie industry. I'd like the industry to lose its inferiority complex to the movie industry. We now reach the same amount of people and we are a bigger business. People now have as much emotional attachment to games as they have to movies. Yes, there might be problems, and, yes, the writing might not be of the same level yet, but the fact is that people love games. We have billions of people who love games, and we know which are important. I don't think we're doing such a bad job. We should be a bit more assertive and say, 'This is a craft that is as important as movies'.

Shigeru Miyamoto says he worries about virtual reality, that the point of gaming is to bring people together, not to isolate them. Can wearable tech, whether it's smartphones or VR headsets, ever be a mainstream phenomenon?
SR I'm really excited about being able to work with Morpheus. Even if it is a fangirl sci-fi future dream, it's just a really cool thing to witness as a human being, to be completely immersed. I don't yet know what the longform game should be. I know there's a leap between it now and getting it in to everybody's living room and that may take a bit of time; it will take games and I'm actually really hoping that this is a way to bring in new experiences, new ideas, new things.
MB The Miyamoto thing is interesting, but I think that's specific to how Miyamoto designs and plays videogames. I don't play videogames to share a room with people. I play videogames to sit and pretend to be Altaïr, to jump from rooftop to rooftop, and my girlfriend occasionally watches. I think Sony's solution – putting the VR picture on the TV at the same time – is incredibly smart. That makes it much more socially acceptable to me. I think [the concept of] wearables in your own home is interesting, but it's going to take a lot to convince me that this is mobile technology, stuff you want to take on the go with you.
DB It's also to do with social acceptability. When smartphones were first around, people were seen as [being] geeky to start fiddling with one. Nowadays, people don't bat an eyelid.
GC But then it also crosses this threshold. The reason why it becomes big is because it's cool and looks good. Currently all that [wearable] stuff makes you look like a dork. They need to be able to make it in a way that makes you look good.
SR It would have to get to the point smartphones did. They enhanced our lives immeasurably in terms of being able to get in touch with our friends, not get lost, do our work, blah blah blah. Anything that's wearable has to be something that actually fits in with all of what we're doing right now. The only thing I can imagine people getting used to is a watch, because we're already used to it.

Wearable tech and VR offer new ways to interact with games, but it will take experimental success stories to popularise them



How does the industry tackle the 'boys' toys' problem that Nathan mentioned? Is it a matter of greater diversity?
SR We've started to get a lot of young women apply to Media ▶



"There's a whole lot we can give back that will just show people that you can be anybody and make games"

Molecule. Not a lot, but a lot in comparison to before. I've been wondering whether or not that's because they know that there are women in the company, and if that's true, all it means is that studios need to properly expose the diversity that exists within those studios.



DB There are several things there. I think we have a lot of women [at Frontier] as well. I've been in computer science lectures at universities where there's not one single female face. That's the group we're choosing from. It's a systemic thing.
SR It goes right back to primary school. Right back to the toy shop.
DB One of the things that frustrates me is the way that IT has been taught in schools. It's very off-putting, particularly for girls. It's very hard not to [sound] sexist, but women are so much better than men at a lot of things; one of them is viewing something as a means to an end, not as a means in itself. Women are more inclined to say of a car, 'Where can I drive in it?' It's more practical, and computers aren't any different. What I would love to see in education is not teaching programming for programming's sake, but to solve a problem.
MB The folder on my computer for *Thomas Was Alone* was called Teaching Myself Unity. I didn't sit down [time after time] because I wanted to learn Unity [for its own sake]; the objective was to make a game.
SR I've been really happy to see so many people joining in as parents at coding clubs within schools and that kind of thing. There's a whole lot we can give back that will just show people that you can be anybody and make games. It even takes an effort in our studio with women wanting to make things.
DB It applies to [all of] STEM actually. The tendency is to get things that are boy-focused. It's hard, but you've got to stop it. It's not that we set out to be discriminatory. It's just the way that our culture is, to some extent.
MB I hear a lot of indies talking about how we're so much better than triple-A in terms of diversity, and how we're doing a better job at capturing this stuff. I think we are to an extent, but if you look at what the financially successful indie games are, there's still a lot of heterosexual white men making those games and at the top of those companies doing that stuff. I refuse to believe that's actually a meritocracy. I think [indies] might be inheriting some of the industry's issues and that's a risk.
SR We have this audience – it's young kids, older kids, people of all the genders, all sexualities, all nationalities, the whole thing. I want to make things that are inclusive for people, but we have to remember to do it. Everything is so much richer for doing it. I would like us all to sort of make love not war, and find a way to get over some of the polarisation there is now. I don't think that it's necessarily that bad. There are some really terrible stories out there to do with our lack of diversity and, yes, actually there have been real problems with sexism, homophobia and those issues. But I think we're a really smart industry full of smart people; it's time to move on and close those chapters. There are so many wonderful people. I would love to see us have an industry-wide epiphany. ■

THE MAKING OF...



STRIDER

The rise and fall of Kouichi Yotsui, the man behind a work of arcade genius

By Daniel Robson

Format Coin-op
Publisher/developer Capcom
Origin Japan
Release 1989

Everything is set in motion with a devilish cackle. Grandmaster Meio, a cloaked villain enshrined in white flames, floats up the screen, the entire globe in his hands, and then onto the golden domes of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic of 2048, a wash of dramatic synth music cascading forth as the hero flies onto the screen on a glider. *Strider* has barely begun, and already it's a thrill ride.

Twenty-five years after the arcade game's release, project lead **Kouichi Yotsui** is no longer at Capcom, and he doesn't hold the world in his hands. In 1991, *Street Fighter II* would arrive and go on to redefine how arcade players spent their ¥100 coins. *Strider*, meanwhile, was consigned to a strange fate, regarded as an unforgettable influence yet barely touched by Capcom until its remake earlier this year, in which Yotsui had no hand.

We meet with Yotsui, now 51, near the base of Mount Takao, outside of Tokyo. Snow lingers on spectacular ranges hemmed by tall trees, a scene so striking that it feels as if futuristic agent-ninja Strider Hiryu could leap out at any moment with his distinctive flying cartwheel and dispatch us with his Cypher plasma sword.

"I've no idea why I joined a game company," Yotsui admits as we settle in at a discreet soba restaurant. He had graduated from a film course at Osaka University Of Arts without a job to move on to. In a rush to repay his debts to a local post-production film company, Yotsui flipped through a careers magazine and found the highest starting salary. That was attached to a job at Capcom, which he joined in 1986 as a graphic artist under Tokuro 'Arthur' Fujiwara, working on arcade games such as *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*. While Yotsui made several videogame proposals of his own, it was then-new head of development Akio Sakai who suggested the project that would end up being Yotsui's first and last game for Capcom as head planner.

"Sakai had the idea of making a project that combined an arcade game, a home console game and a manga, and we discussed the idea with Fujiwara," says Yotsui, who was credited on the game as Isuke. "Then we took the idea to manga company Moto Kikaku."

The home console version was for the 8bit NES, a hugely underpowered machine compared to the arcade version's proprietary CPS-1 board. Strider was only the third game to use the hardware, and Yotsui's experience with



Yotsui placed this would-be boss early in level two in order to mix things up and get arcade players itching to see more

the board on *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* is partly what scored him the gig. He was adamant that his would be the definitive version of *Strider*.

"In those days, arcade games were still Capcom's main business, and I had always been involved in those games, so when they opened a consumer games division, I stayed where I was and [Masahiko] Kurokawa took on

"I WAS FRUSTRATED. I WANTED TO DO MUCH BETTER BUT THE TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE TO US COULDN'T KEEP UP"

the home version of *Strider*," Yotsui says. He notes with a sly smile that the bosses would send the staff they disliked to the consumer division, which was in a separate building. "Naturally, I wanted to make sure the arcade version was better than the home version and the manga. The game world and story were created by Kurokawa, the manga artist [Moto Kikaku's Tatsumi] Wada and myself over dinner."

They devised the story as though it were a manga, and then divided it up between the three versions. "We started with the protagonist, Hiryu. Before we got to the idea of him being a ninja, it was difficult, but once we'd settled on that, the way he would move and the sort of game that would suit such a character came easily. We focused on creating a setting that had not been seen before in a videogame."

And what a setting. From the rooftops and gantries of near-future Kazakhstan – based entirely on pictures from books and imagination, but populated with killer robots and armed guards – the arcade game took in the snowy wilds of Siberia; the Flying Battleship, Balrog, with its anti-gravity generators; the Amazon; and the Grandmaster's lair on the Third Moon.

"Kurokawa and I went to the same university and we both made films, so both of us were into plots and stories," Yotsui explains. "We came up with lots and lots of ideas for settings, and we created all sorts of details that were never used in the games. I just used the parts that would convey the atmosphere I wanted players to feel, and left the rest to the imagination."

Yotsui had the CPS-1 board's power to help realise his own ideas. The technology allowed his team to craft unusually large character sprites and even larger enemies, catching the eye with giant robot foes in the form of a gorilla, a centipede and a fowl with an F-16 for a head.

"Before CPS-1, we just used custom hardware," Yotsui says. "At the start of making a game, we'd figure out how much memory we needed for sound and the other specs, and had the hardware built for us. It wasn't such powerful gear, though, just enough to run character sprites at 16x16 pixels. A 32x32-pixel protagonist was something special. So Hiryu seemed very large, and we couldn't have achieved that without the CP System. If it had been any more powerful, we would have never gone home at night."

By others' accounts, Yotsui worked his core team (himself as planner, two programmers, three background designers and three object designers) extremely hard. But despite the advanced technology at their command, the results always fell short of what was in his head. As a film director, he dreamed in 3D, and envisioned everything at impossible scale.

The thrilling sections of the game where the environment turns against Hiryu – landmines exploding in his wake, flames that chase and bite at his heels, bursts of electricity to dodge, anti-gravity boss fights – are nothing compared with Yotsui's vision, where the player would outrun incoming missiles, for example. "There were limits to what we could achieve back then," Yotsui sighs. "I was frustrated most of the time, because I wanted to do much better but the technology could not keep up." But while the reality couldn't quite meet the ambition, such sequences were the early precursors to the

beautifully scripted action set-pieces we see in the likes of *Uncharted* and *Tomb Raider*.

Yotsui's perfectionist tendencies and filmic desires caused the game to overshoot its budget and miss its December 1988 release, instead hitting arcades in March 1989. "Arcades [then] were mainly populated by serious game fanatics, or otaku, and since there weren't so many games available, they would play anything that came out," Yotsui says. "There were a lot of shooting games at that time. *Street Fighter II* wasn't out yet, and the fighting game boom had not yet begun. I wasn't trying to answer any particular demand with *Strider* – at Capcom, we made games as we wanted to make them."

Nevertheless, he admits that he tried to design the game in such a way as to appeal to arcade gamers and extract their money. The action onscreen had to appeal to the player, but also to the person standing behind them watching, and Yotsui felt he must show new locations with every stage and a constant stream of new ideas.

"Level two was especially important, because it showed that the game would keep changing, and made the player wonder what was coming next," Yotsui says. "Also, while a large boss enemy would usually come at the end of a stage, we put a robot gorilla right at the start of the second stage so that you would see it right away. I might have made it slightly differently for a home console, because the syntax is different."

The NES version of *Strider* was never released in Japan, though it reached North America in July 1989, and the manga series simply sank without a trace. Yet despite reaping awards and goodwill from fans, Yotsui's superior game failed to set the arcade scene on fire. Disappointed at his delayed, over-budget game's failure to fill Capcom's coffers – and, indeed, to fulfil his own vision – he left the company soon after its release. He was therefore long gone when *Street Fighter II* turned the arcade into a one-on-one battleground, causing an explosion in popularity for game centres in Japan and sucking wallets dry.

He was not involved in the many ports of his game that would follow, either. US Gold's 1989 Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, Commodore 64, DOS and ZX Spectrum versions were missing certain battles, audio elements and enemies, and couldn't hope to match up to the CPS-1 board's graphics capabilities, but they still reviewed well. It was Sega's Mega Drive port, now fondly remembered as one of the 16bit console's best games, that came closest to the original, and it's the version that wins Yotsui's approval today.

A smattering of sequels and remakes followed, though none later than 2000, and generally crafted with little love. Hiryu filled the off years with cameos, popping up as a playable fighter in *Namco X Capcom* and the *Marvel Vs Capcom* series. Finally, Capcom engaged Double Helix to collaborate on a polished multiplatform reboot that was released in February this year, with a satisfying fight system, new exploration elements, and even nods to the NES version and Capcom's 1999 *Strider 2* (not to be confused with US Gold's 1990 *Strider II*).

What does the father of the character have to say about it? "I received a sample copy for 360 and I had some opinions about it, but it's not for me to say what they should do," Yotsui says. "It's designed for a different audience."

After Capcom, Yotsui briefly worked with former colleagues Akira Kitamura and Shinichi Yoshimoto at Takeru, which released just a few games (among them 1991's *Cocoron*), before moving on to *Puzz Loop* developer Mitchell Corporation, where he made his own "*Strider* sequel", *Cannon Dancer*, released in the west as *Osman*. The game bore striking similarities in terms of its core mechanics, but its story of an overbearing capitalist society that crushes artistic values while touting false freedom appeared to be an outlet for Yotsui's own frustrations with the making of *Strider*. He also made another game that recalled the acrobatic gameplay of *Strider*, the Square Enix-published *Moon Diver*, in 2011.

Mitchell Corporation went out of business in November 2012. Today, Yotsui is a freelance designer who says he has trouble selling his ideas. In conversation, he is friendly and light of tone, but he appears to feel his best years are behind him, given a recent dearth of respect for innovation among the higher-ups. He says that if anyone takes him seriously, it is only because of *Strider*. He is currently looking to licence 12 of his arcade games for release on iOS, Android or PC.

"I'm not making anything at all right now," he says. "It has become impossible to make consumer games. I have games I want to make, but my games don't sell. I make presentations here and there, but no one is interested. I tell companies to stop making the same old games and to let me make something original. But recently, they just don't listen to me."

Of course, it's natural to speculate that Yotsui's perfectionism made him difficult to work with. Or perhaps his pride just got the better of him. But what price artistic genius? Part of the reason the 2014 *Strider* was so warmly received was the legacy of the 1989 game that spawned it – and that in turn is thanks to Yotsui's clarity of vision.

"I'd like to make action games for home consoles," he says. "I'd like to make something mysterious that no one has ever seen." We put to him the idea of self-publishing or possibly crowd-funding. For a moment he pauses to consider it, and in that moment there exists the possibility of a new action game from the creator of *Strider*, made exactly the way he wants to make it. ■



Kouichi Yotsui
Kouichi Yotsui, planner/director, *Strider*

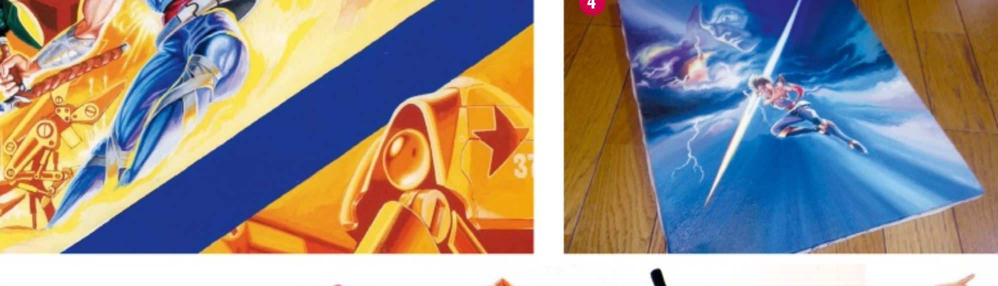
Why did you decide to start the game in Kazakhstan, and why did you opt for a futuristic take on the country?
That part of the world seemed fresh. We wanted to create an adventure in a mysterious place you had never seen before, in a near future that was not too far away from reality. We'd never been there, though, and now when I see Kazakhstan on TV it's totally different than I'd imagined it.

What inspired the huge robot enemies that feature throughout the game?
Since we had a hero who was able to leap nimbly about and climb any surface, it made sense to have large enemies. When you make an action game, an enemy that takes up twice the size of the screen is perfect. We didn't quite pull it off, though.

The dramatic music played a major role in setting the tone. Was that important to you? How much work did that part represent?
I actually got in trouble for having too many songs. Rather than using sound effects, I wanted to convey the changing atmosphere with the music; for example, if it's raining, I wanted the music to reflect that. I drove the composer, [Junko] Tamiya, crazy with my demands.

How close was the finished *Strider* to how you'd envisioned it?
I only got about halfway there. I was miserable. "This isn't it, this isn't it. Next time, I'll do better." I wanted the enemies to be stronger. They're not much of a challenge. But a videogame never comes out how you expect it to, and sometimes you have happy accidents as well as unhappy ones.







❶ Strider Hiryu's trademark cartwheel jump lent a distinctive acrobatic feel to the action. ❷ Project lead Kouichi Yotsui drew heavily on cinema tropes, most notably the James Bond films, to create an air of adventure, as illustrated by this Japanese flyer. ❸ The creatures Hiryu faces across a varied landscape are a mish-mash of fantasy and sci-fi inventions. ❹ An oil painting used for promotion of the game in Japan depicts Strider Hiryu and evil overlord Grandmaster Meio. ❺ Chinese martial arts mistress Tong Pooh has been a staple of the extended series, though many of the core enemies are mechanical. ❻ Friendly robots known as Options – a droid, a sabre-toothed tiger and a hawk – provide backup



STUDIO PROFILE

SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

This is the new stuff: meet the studio leading Call Of Duty into its next generation

By Michael Gapper

SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

Founded 2009
Employees 220
Key staff Glen Schofield (CEO), Michael Condrey (studio head of development), Don Veca (audio director), Aaron Halon (director of product development)
URL www.sledgehammergames.com
Selected softography *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*
Current project *COD: Advanced Warfare*

Compare a team photograph from *Dead Space* developer Visceral (formerly EA Redwood Shores) in the mid-2000s and the Sledgehammer of today, and you'll see plenty of overlap. That's no coincidence. Activision will stress that some cross-pollination was inevitable given the studios' proximity to one another in northern California, and that's true to a point, but while the studio's founders – CEO **Glen Schofield** and studio head **Michael Condrey** – never went out of their way to poach old hands from their former workplace, certainly those old hands were happy to move the seven miles north to work with them again.

"They know the benchmarks exactly," Schofield says. "We don't have to explain that we want greatness; they just know, and over the years they've seen us all aim for that. There's this shorthand everyone's developed with one another that we just don't have to worry about."

"At some other places, you have a game and a team, and when that game is done the teams get split up between other games and teams," Condrey says. "We've been through that, and you lose that cohesiveness, that identity and that shorthand for development. One of the most powerful things in the Activision studio model is that you have one team under one roof focusing on one piece of software. So when you have a team that has worked together for years like we have, with almost no attrition – we've had historically low attrition and lost almost nobody over time – that team starts to form a bond… a family. It's a working relationship that you don't have to retrain."

"And it's just nice," Schofield adds. "It's nice to see guys who were single then get married, buy their first car, first house [and] have their first kid; everyone's appreciative of the fact that they're in a stable place for years."

Founded in 2009, Sledgehammer is now into its sixth year and third game. Its remit initially was to build the first thirdperson adventure in the *Call Of Duty* series – an action game in the style of *Dead Space* named *Fog Of War* – but the studio was quickly put to work making up the numbers on *Modern Warfare 3* when 40 developers followed Infinity Ward's founders out of the door. Somehow interest in a thirdperson *COD* waned in the meantime, and since 2012 the studio has worked on *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, due for release in November.

"Activision came up to us and asked us to work on *Modern Warfare 3*," Schofield says. "But we're making this game here, so we actually



Sledgehammer's HQ is appointed with all of the features expected at a studio of its scale, including a cinema area

went back to the team and we all voted on it, and it was pretty unanimous: 'Yeah, let's go make *MW3*.' It was the right decision. We learned from the best, and look where we are a few years later. It's an honour for us to be given this game; we're the first new team in ten years [to work on *COD*], and the third team in history. For us, it's a big deal. Every day we learn more and more about how to make a great FPS."

"When I reflect back on it, it was a real honour to work with Infinity Ward," Condrey says. "But it's an even greater honour to be allowed the chance to do this for ourselves. We have the expertise… we know the franchise now, we've been presented with this opportunity, so we have to take full advantage of it."

"FOR US, IT'S A BIG DEAL. EVERY DAY WE LEARN MORE AND MORE ABOUT HOW TO MAKE A GREAT FPS"

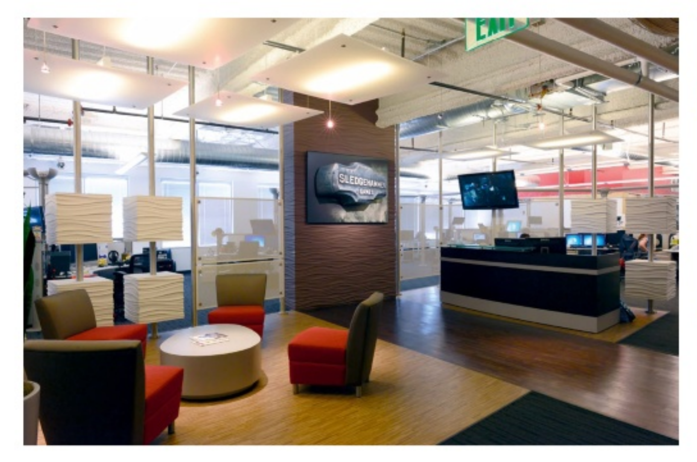
For *Advanced Warfare*, Sledgehammer's self-imposed goal was photorealism. New methods were developed as the studio migrated from traditional painted textures to mathematically accurate models of materials. Artists who worked on *Dead Space* and older games – Schofield himself was an artist on Game Boy games in the early '90s – spent months grappling with the new technology. "It is like maths these days," art director **Joe Salud** says, "but there is art. It's just that the art comes in the post-production now. Once you get everything photorealistic, you can use [film techniques such as] colour grading, and suddenly it's all about how you place objects: set design. The next level is design. How do we make the design cool?"

For all that's new, there are still methods that have carried over from the Visceral days. "I wouldn't sit here and say everything we do in our process is absolutely perfect," development director **Aaron Halon** says. "But we're constantly chipping away at places we feel like we need to get better. That process has evolved over the years, even back [when I was working with] Mike and Glen on *Dead Space*.

"I'm sure you've picked up their personalities. We laugh about it; they're really different. That's a key part of Sledgehammer: there's a very strong creative force Glen embodies and really drives that's all about doing the research and the art. [Whereas] Mike is really focused on the development and the nuts and bolts of how we're actually going to accomplish the vision and the goals. I think today we've gotten to a point with this particular team where I'm really excited about what we're accomplishing, and hopefully that's something you can see in the software."

Each level in *Advanced Warfare* is authored by a different team – another *Dead Space* throwback – with dedicated designers, artists and engineers attached to each 'pod'. "Coming from EA [and] the last game, *Dead Space*, we started dropping the cubes," Schofield says. "And we saw collaboration happen… When we came here, we wanted it open."

"You have all these pods where everyone is working on important things for their levels," Halon says, "but when [we all need to come together], we form a 'strike team' and really pull all the directors together. It's a small portion in time where we all rally around [a task]. The input comes from everyone. It's an opportunity for Glen, for Mike, for the designer, the animator, the leads to all chime in and understand what we're trying to accomplish."





Sledgehammer took its namesake tool to the dividing wall between the spaces of the floor of the Californian tower it calls home. The result is an open-plan studio split up into level-centric pods, which can quickly coalesce when higher-level oversight or thinking is needed

"A level pod will have an animator, a designer or two, a bunch of artists, and they're together throughout," Schofield says. "And they're all involved in design, even the engineers. We've done it different ways in the past – we've had just a mechanics pod where they build all the mechanics and then they put it in a level – but here we do so many things that are specific to a level. We say: 'Here's your engineer,' and they sit with a designer to work out how to make things happen."

Demolishing the Golden Gate bridge was a problem tackled by one such pod. Whether it was even possible outside of a cutscene was a matter of debate until the team assigned to the game's San Francisco level took on the challenge. Every developer is given autonomy regarding how and when they work, with some incentives to keep things on schedule.

"We let people come in when they want," Schofield says. "Everybody here is an adult, so they work through the night if they want. We do say that if you're here by ten in the morning and you work past seven, we'll give you dinner. And everybody knows not to miss that, because a lot of single guys, they want their dinners."

And like Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer is a studio of potential leads. "Eleven of the engineers here have been my leads over the years," Schofield says. "But there's this issue in the game industry where to make money, you have to be a lead, and a lot of them would rather just be incredibly good engineers. Everybody just gets into management because that's where the money is. What we said is, 'You don't need to be a lead to make the money,' and we paid people for their skills. It's nice to have a lead who is just on physics, a lead who is just on tools. They love what they're doing and don't feel like they have to spread themselves thin."

"I'm not just a production person," says Halon to illustrate the point. "I have background in design… I think that core principle runs all the way through the studio. That's something that gives us an advantage, and something I've learned over the years by working at different studios. This is something that really allows us to preserve polish and quality."

Today Sledgehammer has enough capacity for 285 in an open-plan studio space inside an office block in Foster City, California. The walls that once separated two halves of the floor were torn down, and an anechoic chamber was built based on designs by audio director Don Veca. At the fringes of the studio are a handful of private rooms – mostly taken up with popup meetings and the audio and video departments – and a small theatre for big-screen presentations.

"We have a very open collaborative space," Condrey says. "It's got low walls and we love it; there's energy, communication and ideas just flow. There's no closed-door offices where senior guys hide away in the dark."

The three spaces in which *Call Of Duty* games are developed couldn't be more different. Treyarch's studio is a bunker, with low lights and few windows, where developers work in close proximity. Infinity Ward's space is all cement and white plaster, decorated with stark murals taken from the *Modern Warfare* series; developers have their own rooms and each department has its own custom-built space. At Sledgehammer privacy is ensured by space; the pods are spread a short walk from one another and a communal kitchen at the centre brings everyone together.

"We meet [Infinity Ward and Treyarch] at least once a year and get together," Schofield says. "Everybody gets together and the leaders talk. For a couple of days, you go out to dinner and you sit in presentations. One team will get up and talk about what they're doing. There's a lot of sharing going on, a lot of talking."

From occupying the corner of one floor to the entirety of another, the studio has grown over its five years, and it's still hiring. Schofield echoes Infinity Ward executive producer Mark Rubin when he talks about the power of *Call Of Duty* as a recruitment tool. "We've hired 120 people in just the last ten months," he says. "When we started with the game, Sandy, who is the lead on VFX, said, 'We'll need 20 VFX people.' I got her six. Well, now we're at 22. I was told, and you know what? That's her job. What's nice about *COD* is that we can get some of the best in the world."

"DEVELOPING A GAME OF THIS SCALE FOR 40 MILLION FANS, WITH *THIS* BAR – NOTHING PREPARED ME FOR THAT"

"I feel like we brought a lot of best practices from our previous careers," Condrey says. "That's helped this studio form [into] what it is today, but I think *Call Of Duty* sets the bar so high… I think developing a game of this scale for 40 million fans, with *this* bar – nothing prepared me for that. I'll be honest, building a new IP that will maybe sell a couple of million units is very different to making for 40 million ravenous fans who want a 90-rated game. I don't think we'll ever underestimate that responsibility." ■



① Face scarves are apparently à la mode in the future, as seen here on a collection of rioters (see also: *Watch Dogs*).
② The Supply Drop multiplayer reward system has over 350 weapon variants, thousands of custom gear pieces and consumable bonuses such as extra perks to dish out



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Mario Kart 8 Wii U
They should call *Mario Kart 8*'s online mode 300cc. The step up from offline play is brutal, showing that the singleplayer AI is, in fact, quite lenient. Here, a Spiny Shell's just the start, and is typically followed by a barrage of shells, fireballs, banana skins and God knows what else as you plummet from first to last within a couple of corners of the finish line. "So unfair!"

Rogue Legacy PS4, Vita
There's something a little off about the resolution, but *Rogue Legacy* is a delight on Vita, as suited to portable play as the big screen – and thanks to cross-format saving, we can have it both ways. Character randomisation can frustrate when you're served up a choice between three lemons, but Cellar Door's game retains its charm even when making you trek through Castle Hamson as a shortsighted, flatulent dwarf.

The Last Of Us Remastered PS4
If you haven't played *The Last Of Us* since its original appearance some 14 months ago, you may well have forgotten just how long the game takes to *really* kick into gear. Fortunately, on PS4 you at least get to be distracted by, among other enhancements, perhaps the most realistic-looking clothing fabrics ever rendered in a videogame. At £40/$50, this is hardly a cheap repeat ticket, but once the game takes flight it stands up remarkably well in the retelling.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE





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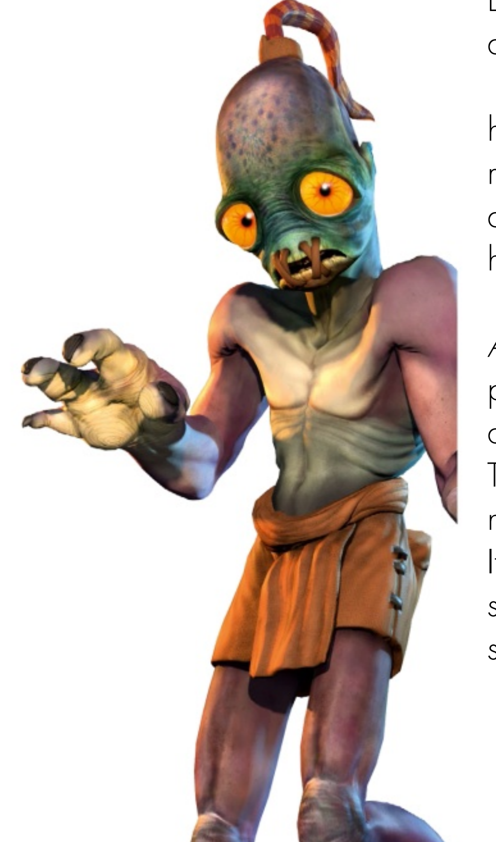
Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

Making something old

New console hardware may now be established on shelves and under TVs, but there remains the lingering suspicion that this generation hasn't really begun in earnest yet. The summer months are typically fallow, of course, but this has been a quiet first nine months for Xbox One and PS4.

Filling the gaps are remakes and re-releases. Console libraries swell not with new big-budget exclusives but HD remasters and ports of last year's PC games. Remakes aren't necessarily easy to produce, but they demand less work than producing a brand-new game. Crank up the pixel count, increase the framerate, tweak a few sliders and you're away (that's how it works, right, Internet?).

The remastering process becomes more problematic, however, when you're not dealing with a year-old title. When setting out to produce an HD remake of a PS1 game, you're going to redo the visuals, but what about the mechanics? By bringing the game up to modern standards, you risk alienating the very people for whom you're remaking it.



With *Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty* (p110), Just Add Water has elected to leave the source material largely intact, marrying 2014 visuals with 1997 gameplay. The results are jarring, the mechanical progress of 17 years only highlighted when wrapped in the aesthetics of today.

The inspiration for *80 Days* (p119), meanwhile, predates *Abe's Oddysee* by 120 years or so. It has no mechanics to pilfer or live up to, either, leaving Inkle Studios free to take a different tack. The result is a charming retelling of Around The World In Eighty Days that offers something the original never could: a different story for each trek around the globe. It shows that you can respect the source material without slavishly adhering to it. For Just Add Water, however, it seems nostalgia isn't quite what it used to be.

Hohokum

There's been a great deal of debate over whether what the cynical have labelled 'walking simulators' – *Dear Esther*, *Proteus* et al – can be defined as games, but much less has been said about creations that focus solely on play. Experiments such as *Flow* and *Noby Noby Boy* revel in their goal-less abstraction, offering the room to prod and poke at their worlds with no particular end in mind. *Hohokum* isn't quite as freeform as those examples, but while Honeyslug has set out objectives for you to complete, you're going to have to work out what they are all on your own.

There is, however, a nudge in the right direction before you're let loose. In the opening area, we learn that Cross makes our monocular spermatozoon-like creature move faster, while Circle slows it to a creeping pace. But how you should progress beyond that hub section, or the fact that pumping the shoulder buttons – inputs also used for steering instead of the left stick – accelerates you up to a much greater speed as you wiggle, is left unsaid. *Hohokum* is built on the inherent delight of discovery, and preserving this joy means detailed explanations are best avoided.

Forgive us, then, for discussing it in broader terms. *Hohokum*'s world is divided into individual levels that are connected by portals, and which can be completed in almost any order. Some apertures lead directly to another level, while others take you to transitional spaces that see you float from one portal to the next, perhaps with some navigational gimmick thrown in, such as circles of colour that act like pinball bumpers. The levels themselves range from expansive and intricately detailed to more compact, simpler affairs, and a fellow serpentine creature lies hidden in each one.

Sometimes you might be able to see them straight away, but more often they remain out of sight until you've triggered a particular sequence of events. You'll have to reunite an amorous fisherman with his aquatic love, but first you'll need to deal with the aggressive octopus in her path. You must negotiate an overweight game hunter's bazooka-launched bullet hell as the sloths on your back hurl jellybeans in response. And you'll need to coax exhausted creatures into depositing their waste so that you can fill up a clanking industrial complex, enabling you to swim through its bulging, excrement-filled pipelines.

Each area is brought to surreal life by Richard Hogg's charismatic illustrations, which channel the work of designers such as Alvin Lustig and Paul Rand, contrasting bold, flat colours with often grotesque biological detail. Objects resembling stamen or uvulae bristle and swell when you brush past them, gardens spring into life, and colour schemes shift according to your actions. It is one of the most responsive game environments we've ever visited, almost everything reacting to your touch in some way.

Publisher SCEE
Developer Honeyslug
Format PS3, PS4, Vita
Release Out now

You'll reunite an amorous fisherman with his aquatic love, but first you'll need to deal with the octopus in her path



THE EYES HAVE IT
In the first level, you'll meet a bearded hermit living on an island decorated by eyes. There are more eyes to find across the level, each of them closed and perhaps camouflaged by leaves or hidden among street lights. Move over them and they'll pop open with an alert chime, blinking as you fly past. As you find more, the bearded chap paints coloured lines on a post next to his chair, and finding them all will reveal a secret. There are many other secrets to discover, too, usually spanning several levels, with hints on solving a problem in one perhaps found in another.

The world is populated by a whole society of odd-looking creatures that dance, sing and sometimes struggle among the alien, yet disconcertingly familiar, landscapes. While the mood of the game swings from jubilation to despondency, *Hohokum* is at its best during its darkest moments – the solution to that octopus problem, for instance, or a particularly haunting jaunt into the future during another level. But even when it veers into organic horror or cataclysm, the game never abandons its cheeky sense of humour.

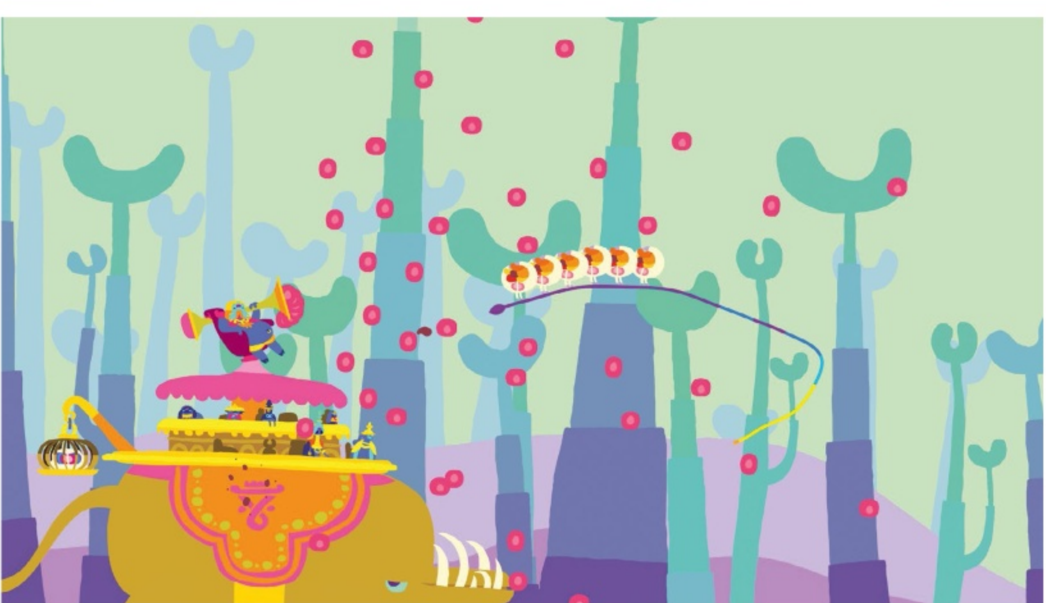
Equally instrumental in creating *Hohokum*'s rich atmosphere is its soundtrack – provided by US indie label Ghostly International artists such as Tycho, Shigeto and Matthew Dear – the combination of glitchy, wistful electronica proving a perfect match for Hogg's visuals. And like the game, the music is also nonlinear, tracks phasing in and out as you explore and interact with the levels. Sometimes that means a gradual build towards a crescendo as you put the pieces in place to solve the puzzle in hand, while at other points you can mix elements of the tune as you please, or improvise your own melody by twanging taut ropes or switching lights on and off. *Hohokum* is as much a musical toy as it is a videogame.

But its most engaging element – the freedom to explore and discover without guidance – is also *Hohokum*'s potential problem. The sense of achievement and elation at solving an opaque puzzle is profound, but there are just as many elements to interact with that turn out to be closed loops as there are avenues to solutions. For example, there's a ring of odd-looking floating plants in the corner of one level that, when hit in the right way, cause a growth to appear, which can then be burst for seemingly no reason at all. This lack of distinction between pure play and objectives is central to the game's appeal, but such wilful obscurity can prove frustrating when you're at a loss and trying to figure out what to do next.

There are a few mechanical issues, too, including some occasionally questionable collision detection and the odd ability to fly beyond the borders of the level, meaning you must navigate back to the play area blind. Keeping your bearings is also a problem on larger levels, since even with the camera fully zoomed out (controlled using the right stick), your field of view is limited. The labyrinthine world can cause navigational issues too if, as we did, you miss an exit portal.

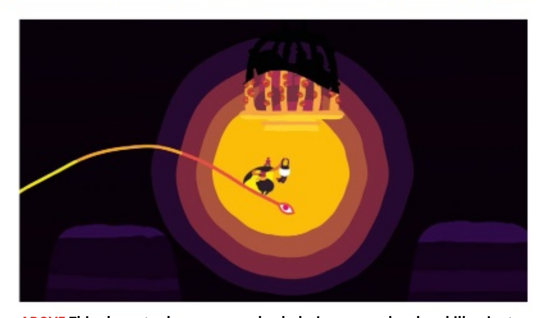
But these issues are infrequent, not pervasive, and seem a small price to pay for the bravery of design that characterises *Hohokum*, blending classic game design elements imperceptibly with more abstract ideas. While playing it with progress and goals in mind can be baffling, settling into its peculiar rhythm of discovery is as cathartic as it is revelatory.

8

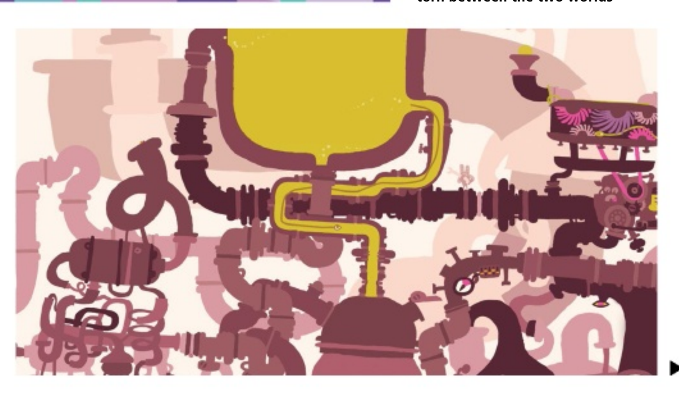


ABOVE All manner of creatures exist in *Hohokum*, and many will hitchhike where possible. Alone or with company, the colour of your body will shift with the direction of your movement, even being mirrored by DualShock 4's light bar. **LEFT** Honeyslug occasionally folds in more recognisable gameplay ideas, including this bullet-hell boss fight of sorts that serves as the climax of one of the simpler levels

BELOW This level perhaps best sums up *Hohokum*'s atmosphere, blending pollutant-fuelled factory machinery with ancient ruins and a race of sullen creatures apparently torn between the two worlds



ABOVE This character hops on your back during a cave level and illuminates your immediate surroundings. The level is filled with bats that attack you when disturbed by light, briefly extinguishing the flame if they catch you



Post Script

Interview: Ricky Haggett, designer of Hohokum and CEO of Honeyslug

Ricky Haggett co-founded London-based boutique studio Honeyslug along with Natalie Marco and Mark Inman in 2008. He is perhaps best known to players for Vita's *Frobisher Says*, and to developers for co-organising London Indies and Wild Rumpus events.



What inspired the game?
It sort of came about as a catalyst for Dick [Hogg] and I to collaborate. Dick sent me some drawings and said, "Hey, we should make a videogame..." And we started down this path of him drawing stuff and me programming stuff, but very much in our spare time. It was a little thing that we worked on between other things, and over that period it changed a lot – there were lots of prototypes. This idea of a long, snake-like character that people ride on the back of wasn't our first idea; that was something that was hewn out of the rock of lots of other ideas.

There seems to be a vague conception theme going on. Is that intentional?
I'm quite reticent to be very specific about it. I think everyone's interpretation of it is interesting and I'm not sure there is a definitive answer for that. It definitely isn't, 'This is the story of the struggle of a particular being...' The elements which bookend the game, and which provide a sort of very loose spine in all of the adventures you have in the other places, are kind of open to interpretation. Like it's definitely clear that your character is a traveller from another place.

The imagery often toys with the grotesque. Where did that come from?
I think it comes from two separate places. In terms of that stuff being there in the first place, it's a desire to make the world of *Hohokum* feel as much as possible like a believable world. And in the real world, nature is kind of gross in a lot of ways. We're really interested in the flora and fauna of the world, and some of my favourite things about *Hohokum* are, like, plants that exist in two completely different places but that are obviously cousins of each other – there's this implication that they're subspecies. So when it came to populating these worlds, of course we were going to fill them with this kind of stuff, because we're interested in it and we want to make it feel like a believable place. And then in terms of visually what that stuff looks like, I guess you just have to look at Dick's sketchbooks! [Laughs] We're really into things where there's a crossover – like, am I looking at a thing that's a man-made kind of plastic? Or am I looking at a creature that's soft and fleshy? Or am I looking at a hard seed or nut casing?

"I think when Hohokum works really, really well, people just kind of absorb what's going on through osmosis"



The soundtrack is a big part of the atmosphere. How did that collaboration come about?
We knew music was going to be super-important. Once we got to the point where Dick had done some drawings, we put them in the engine and you could fly around them, we knew that music was absolutely crucial to making these places feel right. I think Dick burned me a CD of a bunch of stuff, and from there we started working on a Spotify playlist, which had about 50 tracks in it by the end, including people like Shigeto, Tycho and Matthew Dear. And at this point, Alex Hackford, who's Sony Santa Monica's music licensing guy, looked at our playlist and said, "Hey, do you realise there's a bunch of Ghostly artists on this? Why don't we talk to them?" And that really quickly turned into the idea of some of their artists being interested in composing new material for the game. And when that was suggested, we bit their arm off, obviously – that's a really cool thing to happen!

There's ambiguity in every aspect of *Hohokum*. Why was this an important design direction for you?
I think that when *Hohokum* works really, really well, people just kind of absorb what's going on through osmosis without really thinking too hard about it. It's almost like they've been set on a path of completing some series of tasks without ever being told that there even are any tasks, and I think that feels magical. Another part of it is that we really want this place to feel immersive and real. You're flying around these worlds that Dick, the animators and audio designers have poured lots of love into, and it seems a real shame to then layer that with telling people stuff about what's going on and what to do.

Is that also a reaction to the hand-holding that's prevalent in modern game tutorials?
Yeah, although I think *Hohokum* is obviously at the extreme end of the scale... [Laughs] We trust that the player's going to figure out what they need to, and I'm comfortable with the idea that some people might not figure stuff out. And I also think that 90 per cent of the games I play could do with telling their players less. It infuriates me when you're supposed to be exploring an exciting fantasy land that people have worked really hard to make beautiful and believable, and then there's just a ton of exposition... You're undermining all of that hard work. One of the reasons *Dark Souls* is such an amazing game is because it trusts its players to explore its world and figure out what the rules are. And that's a really powerful thing. If you trust people, then they have to work to figure things out for themselves, and that's a really positive experience. ■

Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty

Of all the old games pining for a fresh lick of paint, *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* is among the most deserving. It was ambitious for its time on its release in 1997, with a simple-but-versatile chat system that allowed players to communicate with in-game characters, and that still feels fresh today. And its exploration of class and industrialism, and certainly its unpreaching environmentalism, are more relevant now than they've ever been. So in many respects, *Abe's Oddysee* is a better fit for today's more experimental market than it was for the original PlayStation, even if Just Add Water's undeniably thorough overhaul of the original is still too superficial to compete with *Oddysee*'s descendants.

Even so, it's impossible not to be a little seduced by the new look. Every asset has been recreated in 3D, is beautifully textured, and is lit dynamically, making for an extremely plush-looking game. Detailed backgrounds stretch off into the distance, lending Abe's world considerably greater depth, and the various areas you travel through are now more distinct for having been extricated from the muddy sprites of the original game. And with the banishment of sprites comes the introduction of ragdoll physics, which make the innumerable deaths of your enemies and fellow Mudokon slaves even more disturbing to witness (or, more usually, perpetrate).

But it would be unfair to dismiss *New 'N' Tasty* as a simple aesthetic upgrade. Just Add Water has modernised the game in other respects, too, and the most striking change – though itself a byproduct of the improved visuals – is a new swooping camera, which replaces the original's flickbook screen transitions. The result is more dynamic framing as the camera playfully pans around Abe and moves in and out of the screen, which not only strengthens the already potent sense of place, but blends once-compartmentalised puzzles and platforming sections into something more coherent.

This apparently simple change has resulted in the need to tweak enemy behaviour and redesign some of the puzzles. Sligs, the gun-toting henchmen hired by the unscrupulous Glukkons to guard Rupture Farms and other industrial areas, now react differently to your presence and can see farther, a red beam emanating from their visor to let you know when they're fully alert. And alerted Sligs will now go back to sleep after a quick search. This, given the increased pace of the game and likelihood of running into slumbering guards before you hear their snores, provides a welcome second chance to be stealthy. The original's shadowy hiding places, meanwhile, have become vents of industrial steam in *New 'N' Tasty*, but retain their frustrating inability to hide any Mudokons in your charge – and if you want to see the good ending, you'll need to keep as many of them alive as possible.

Publisher Oddworld Inhabitants
Developer Just Add Water
Format PC, PS3, PS4 (tested), Vita, Wii U, Xbox One
Release Out now (PS4), others TBC

Control niggles are unlikely to matter to those who long to return to a brighter, bolder take on Abe's world



Thank goodness, then, for the new quicksave option, which helps to mitigate the rather harsh mid-'90s checkpointing. Just click the touchpad to save, and hold it for a second to pick up where you were before death. It's a welcome addition but it's also a blunt solution to a more systemic problem: for all the visual enhancements, this still feels like a 17-year-old game.

One of the more frustrating ways *New 'N' Tasty* shows its age is in its fussiness. Interactions with the environment, such as pulling a lever, climbing up to a ledge or leaping a gap, require almost pixel-perfect positioning. There are only so many times Abe can shrug and say, "Can't figure it out..." while standing *right* next to a switch before his charm begins to wear thin. It becomes a much bigger problem when running from a fast-moving enemy, and many of the game's puzzles are built around provoking Sligs or Scrabs and then quickly getting out of the way of their bullets and sharp beaks respectively.

These problems are compounded by the slightly odd decision to map the original's digital controls onto the DualShock 4's analogue sticks, the central dead zone working against the refinement of Sony's controller by making inputs seem vague and laggy. You can't revert to the D-pad, either, because it's now exclusively reserved for Abe's GameSpeak. And then there's a more modern concern in the form of a juddering framerate, which you'll encounter whenever the camera pulls back to take in more than one screen's worth of those sumptuous visuals – usually triggered, ironically, because you need to move more quickly than normal.

***Abe's Oddysee* wasn't** a very good platformer the first time around. It was, however, an intoxicating story-driven adventure with some great puzzles and a heap of clunky platform elements. And given *New 'N' Tasty*'s status as fan service (Oddworld Inhabitants canvassed fans to ascertain which project they wanted to see next), these control niggles are unlikely to matter to the people who simply long for an opportunity to return to a brighter, bolder take on Abe's world.

For players who didn't fall in love with Abe the first time around, it's a harder sell. Despite its forward-looking features, *Oddysee* feels a little decrepit when compared to the glut of retro-inspired platform puzzlers available right now, despite *New 'N' Tasty*'s facelift putting it among the prettiest of them. It's by no means a bad game, simply an outdated one, and the fact that it's only just behind the curve serves as a reminder of what Oddworld's creators are capable of when focused on new ideas. Hopefully, *New 'N' Tasty* will sell in significant enough numbers to fund the inevitable *Exoddus* remake. And if that can shift enough copies, we might get to see what Oddworld Inhabitants and Just Add Water can do with a blank canvas.

6

RIGHT Scrabs, like the one seen in the distance here, are wild animals that will chase you down and gore you with their sharp beaks if they see you. If two meet, however, they'll fight to the death, giving Abe the chance to get away







ABOVE "A lot of the look of the game is because of the English artists," *Oddworld* creator Lorne Lanning says. "I don't think if this game was made in the United States, the same details would have been in the environments. The US just does not look that way." **LEFT** The new realtime lighting is beautiful and atmospheric, making Abe's world even richer as his adventure plays out. The drone in the sky prevents you from chanting, and thereby possessing enemies

BELOW These motion-sensing gates move back and forth along the walkway and trigger the arrival of explosive drones if you're not standing still when they pass by



Post Script

Interview: Lorne Lanning, co-founder and COO, Oddworld Inhabitants

Lorne Lanning is the co-founder of Oddworld Inhabitants and the creator of the long-running *Oddworld* series. As well as designing the games, he wrote their scripts and provided the voices. He's now working with UK studio Just Add Water on updated versions of *Oddworld* games, with a view to creating brand-new entries in the series in time.

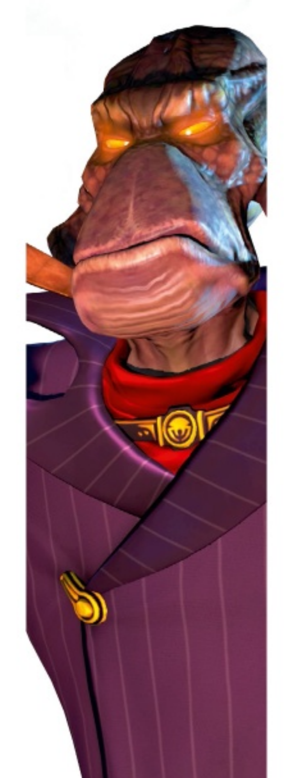


Were you surprised that people asked for an update of *Abe's Oddysee*?
I really was. If I were in a vacuum, trying to anticipate what people are going to want, I wouldn't have anticipated this. If you've been in the industry long enough, with the exception of Will Wright, you've gotten pretty beaten up at times. And each time you get beat up, which is basically a lesson in the marketplace, it's kind of like a car crash – you drive a little more carefully afterwards. When you're younger and naïve, you're like, 'We're going to build the biggest hit. Let's do it!' And you just go after it like you're going after a gold medal. And then every time you miss, you're like, 'Oh, shit, maybe we shouldn't have gone so strong.' [Laughs.] You get wiser, and with that you take fewer risks. And with the way the competitive landscape is today, I didn't even think that *Stranger's Wrath HD* would go over as well as it did.

Why did you decide to keep Abe's controls more or less digital for *New 'N' Tasty*?
In the original, we didn't have [analogue] sticks [on the PlayStation controller], and it was a grid-based game, so Abe would always be standing in a box. That made it even more difficult and sluggish, because you had to hit those points right. If you missed a step, you always missed it by three feet! What we wanted to do in *New 'N' Tasty* is make it more physics driven and let players nudge Abe. So instead of having walk, sneak and run as three different combos, you have it all on one stick now. I think people who approach it like an action game sometimes get disappointed because they're forgetting that it's a puzzle game, albeit a hilarious puzzle game where guys get horribly disfigured if you fail [laughs].

But *Abe's Oddysee* and *Exoddus* also feel more like fleshed-out worlds than simply being abstract platformers or puzzlers.
As a genre, I always felt that the sidescrolling platformer genre was one of the best at being able to give us the impression that the characters are alive in that world, as silly as that may sound. We still have responsive controls, but it's less like you're controlling a piece of art, and more like you're controlling a life form, so you have inertia that you've got to deal with.

"If I were in a vacuum, trying to anticipate what people are going to want, I wouldn't have anticipated this"



We want to get that fidelity of animation, and the response to not just be popping all the time. That's something that's always bothered me about Miyamoto's games: I turn the character in a different direction and he doesn't do any in-betweens. He just pops and faces the other way. That reinforced to me that I'm not controlling a life form, but a game. And we were always searching for that next level of that. What if we spent time trying to build the lifelike believability between these characters through the way that they talk to each other and the way their emotions come out?

***Abe's Oddysee* was ahead of its time in that it was a platformer with a social conscience in the '90s. Today, every platformer seems to have a deeper message. How do you feel about that?**
I think it's awesome, personally. *Limbo*, in particular, and *Braid*. When I saw *Limbo* I felt, in a way, envious. It was so hauntingly beautiful. I remember I had designed a game when we first started *Oddworld*, and I was hoping it would become its own series. It's something we've never even talked about. You were an assassin, having to go into the Soviet Union and blow up a premier's speech, and I wanted to do it in this beautiful '30s or '40s film-noirish quality with a lot of shadows and just super-high-contrast black and white. And then I saw *Limbo* and I was just like, "Wow, that's *so* gorgeous".

Many people don't like to revisit their past work. How did it feel to so closely re-examine something you'd made so long ago?
I'm no exception! Truthfully, I had this fantasy that I wouldn't have to be involved. Because largely with *Stranger HD*, I really wasn't involved – just at an executive creative producer level. Trying to let Just Add Water be autonomous, trying to give them feedback, but really hoping they could just do it. I think *Stranger* was a simpler case. For this project, at the beginning, I was hoping it would go the same way, but in reality it was just a much harder design and production to tackle. I think we got into a little trouble with it around halfway through, once we switched over from Bitsquid to Unity. We started overcoming some of the challenges we were having on Bitsquid; [we were] running more smoothly on Unity, but getting to the point where we were realising the impact of the design and going to a higher-speed sidescrolling setup rather than flipscreen. And that meant we really had to dive back in there; I had to dive back in there to work with the crew. I did that joyfully, but there's certainly a part of me that would occasionally would remind people I did this 17 years ago [laughs]. ■


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The Wolf Among Us: Season One

The best moments in Telltale's episodic take on Bill Willingham's Fables comic book series have nothing to do with picking apart the plot or making grand moral decisions, but of being complicit in its greatest lie. As Bigby Wolf, sheriff and muck magnet for a New York community of exiled fairytale characters, it's your job to keep the peace via any means necessary, but usually QTEs. It's a job that means being insulted, beaten up, and often dismissed as simply the muscle of an uncaring administration. It's also a job about restraint, about allowing even the city's worst scum to forget, until there is no other option, that Bigby is not simply a big bad wolf, but *the* Big Bad Wolf, leashed only by his fragile restraint. If he huffs and puffs, your house is the least he will blow down.

This sense of power immediately shifts *The Wolf Among Us*'s tone from that of *The Walking Dead*, which casts the player as the victim. In any straight fight, any intimidation, Bigby is tiers above just about everyone, to the point that fights are less about whether he wins than whether he pulls his punches or curb stomps foes. His main reason not to let loose is his desire (stronger here than in the Fables comics, set a decade later) to both not be that guy any more and to look good for Snow White, his current boss and future wife.

It's a clever duality, making the noir inspiration behind the story far stronger than simply the cigarettes and fedoras and other surface-level trappings, which is where games such as *LA Noire* and *Face Noir* typically give up. Even the menu contributes: Bigby in a world of shadows and stories, stalking an as-yet-undetermined prey through sharp yellow eyes, a wolf in our clothing.

Where *The Wolf Among Us* struggles is in taking this, and a generally excellent recreation of Fabletown, and turning it into a detective game. It doesn't help that it assumes a fair amount of knowledge about the universe, including the vulnerability of Fables and what gives them their power, or that it at times forgets its own plot points – most notably at one stage having the whole cast rounding on a character based on photographic evidence, despite the case hinging on magical glamours that can make anyone look like anyone else.

Crime scenes are purely a case of walking around and looking at everything that can be looked at, punctuated with often overlong dialogue sequences where little of real note is said, and only occasionally is a real choice offered – usually which suspect to beat up for information, or which of a couple of potential locations to go to next. Not only are there few real Eureka moments upon discovering a crucial clue, with everything laid out neatly in the name of forward momentum, but Bigby also often comes across as dense, confused and surprised by his own success, a far cry from the ruthless spymaster in the comics. If you haven't read them, it doesn't matter, his presence

Publisher/developer Telltale Games
Format 360, iOS, PC (tested), PS3, PS4, Vita, Xbox One
Release Out now; TBA (PS4, Vita, Xbox One)

Even at its best, the plot is more interesting for its use of fantastical characters than what it does with them



works; character in general is one of *The Wolf Among Us*'s biggest strengths throughout. Having seen him at his future peak, though, at times his game persona feels like someone writing Columbo without realising that the incompetence is an act.

The overall story is a prequel to the comics, which doesn't help. The first episode, for instance, ends with Snow White's apparent murder and the discovery of her severed head, despite her being alive and well on the page decades later. Most of the other main characters' fates are likewise too locked down for them to be plausible suspects, though the new ones Telltale has added to the mix are an entertaining bunch. Georgie Porgie has been reimagined as a pimp who runs a strip club called Pudding & Pie; Mr Toad, meanwhile, is an opportunistic slumlord.

What story there is clicks along at a decent pace and with plenty of good moments, from vicious punch-ups and chase scenes to sombre moments, such as Bigby dealing with grieving relatives who feel let down by the system and are fighting their own natural urges to Hulk out and seek vengeance. The option to end the whole thing with a trial of the villain or not is likewise a clever moment, though one whose attempts to add a sense of guilt to past decisions is somewhat at odds with the good moral path also usually being the most sensible (a problem that also hit *The Walking Dead*'s first season, with its barely grubbier shades of grey).

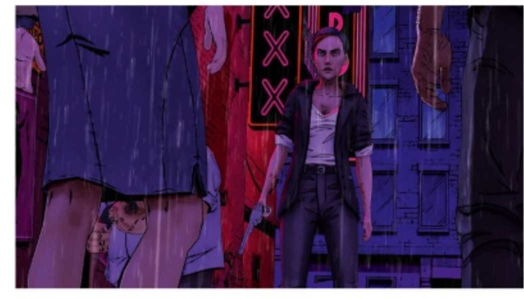
Yet even at its best, the plot is more interesting for its use of fantastical characters than what it does with them, being quick to descend into the clichéd world of dead prostitutes and sinister crime lords, the latter flipping from mysterious shadowy figures to local celebrities based entirely on whether the main character has heard of them. There are some clever twists as a result of the magical world, but it's all very standard fare that cries out for at least some subtlety, rather than a criminal whose claims of being a man of the people are undercut by him using a torture device as a logo, and Bigby's focus largely assumed rather than earned. It desperately wants to dig into Fabletown, and explore its problems and hypocrisies, but again, that's a story that's been written without much wiggle room left.

The result of all this is an adventure that often struggles under the weight of its own potential, without the confidence to break far enough from *The Walking Dead* template or the emotional core that allowed that series to hit far above its limitations. Even so, it is not a bad series at all. Much like Bigby, at least at this point, it's as solid and dependable as it is rough around the edges. As a Fables game, as a slice of urban fantasy, it works. When it tries to step out of Telltale's comfort zone, however, it struggles to keep its footing too often to earn its happily ever after.

6



LEFT Not the most pleasant QTE, but it's nothing compared to half of the stuff Clementine's been through over in *The Walking Dead*. Besides, Bigby can take it, so long as there's no silver involved. **BELOW** Bigby is a better detective than people give him credit for, but he's helped by the baddies not being particularly good at covering their tracks. Or, in fact, even trying. **MAIN** Bigby isn't normally as into the noir style as he is during this series, but he pulls it off, and without the need for a fedora or a CD full of speakeasy classics



ABOVE *The Wolf Among Us* doesn't betray its comic book origins in its translation to a fully 3D engine, its scrappy backgrounds coloured by bold lighting and given depth by Telltale's unusually vivid shadow work





Velocity 2X

The trouble with sequels is that everyone expects more. While bigger does occasionally equate to better for videogames, that approach isn't necessarily the wisest course to take with one as taut and lean as *Velocity*. When a game is built for speed, as this one undoubtedly is, it can't afford any flab. It's a shame, then, that *Velocity 2X* has reported for duty carrying a few extra pounds. This is still a very fine game, but at times it's also a cautionary tale: it turns out you really can have too much of a good thing.

Not that you'd necessarily notice from its snappy opening, or the way its new ideas steadily unfurl over the first two dozen or so stages. For the most part, this is the *Velocity* we know and love: you'll weave and boost your way through a series of elaborately constructed stages, bombing turrets, blasting ships and teleporting past apparent cul-de-sacs, rescuing survivors in floating blue space pods as you go. As before, you'll have to disable energy barriers by shooting security gates in numerical order, the twist being that this time you won't always be able to see the number.

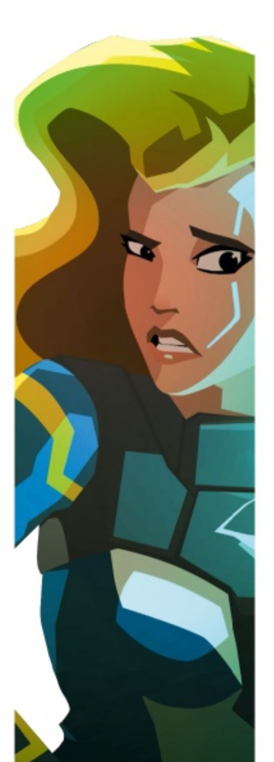
Happily, there will always be a nearby port at which to dock your ship so you can determine the missing digit. These sidescrolling platforming sections see Lt Kai Tana, the space pilot who fleetingly appeared in the previous game's interstitial comic panels, using a series of biomechanical augmentations to run faster and jump farther than would otherwise be possible. Her suit is powered by energy from a mineral known as Rekenium; handily, she'll find plenty of crystals indoors, which she can dislodge from the floor and ceiling with blasts from her palm cannon. It's not long before she's able to mirror her ship's teleportation ability, although her tele-dashes are comparatively short-ranged. At first, she'll blink through walls, then through hazards, and finally through guards from a malevolent alien race whose weak spot is on their backs. Dash, turn and fire: it's enormously satisfying every time. Likewise, the slide that Tana employs to skid beneath low walls, and whenever you pull off a perfect jump-dash to escape the laser hazards that mean instant death.

As these obstacles get increasingly difficult to bypass, you'll be grateful that FuturLab has removed the original game's lives mechanic, as if it understood that some sections here are likely to kill players repeatedly. That perhaps says much about how exacting these interior sequences can be. In some, there's not much leeway when it comes to the tele-dash, though the absence of any instantly apparent punishment for death means that some of the earlier game's tension is lost.

The later addition of teleporter pods that Tana can throw, however, is more problematic, entirely disrupting the game's sense of flow. You'll have to stop, hold Triangle, move the analogue stick until you find the right arc, and then release the button to throw.

Publisher SCEE
Developer FuturLab
Format PS4 (version tested), Vita
Release September 2 (NA), 3 (EU)

This is a very fine game, but at times it's also a cautionary tale: it turns out you really can have too much of a good thing



Sometimes you'll have to target specific points on the floor or ceiling, clumsily denoted by icons to highlight exactly where you need to aim. *Velocity 2X* is at its best when you're allowed to build up thrilling momentum; these sections bring you to a juddering halt.

It's telling that only carelessness or haste will get you killed when you're back inside the cockpit – there are few moments that require the same kind of intricate manoeuvring as *Velocity* demanded – whereas on foot something as simple as an unfortunate telepod bounce or a split-second error on a jump-dash is enough to lose you that perfect ranking. And while the gold medal standards are as strict as ever, the par times for silver are too generous – if you don't surpass bronze on your first attempt, you surely will on your second. By this stage, having likely rescued all the pods, collected all the crystals, and earned the maximum points tally (each of which gives you an XP bonus towards unlocking later levels), you'll be forced to consider whether the gold medal is truly worth it. On a stage like Level 47, in which a silver medal performance might take you 20 minutes, you may come to feel the reward isn't quite commensurate with the effort.

It's testament to the high standards set by the rest of the game that these problems don't derail it for too long. *Velocity* favoured substance over style, but there's an abundance of the latter in FuturLab's art here. With five very different areas to explore – from the verdant planet of a pacifist alien race to the *Mirror's Edge*-inspired architecture of Tiracas, the paradise home of the antagonists – *Velocity 2X* doesn't lack for visual variety. And while you'll hear familiar themes in the soundtrack, you'll struggle to find any game with better sound effects for beam weapons and shattering glass.

While a speedrun attempt never quite feels as instinctual as its forerunner, with a few too many variables to consider at any one time, *Velocity 2X* remains astonishingly satisfying at its core. It's easy to get the basics wrong, but FuturLab knows that controls should be responsive, framerates should be smooth and consistent, and explosions should be large and noisy. *Velocity 2X* is a game that allows you to be nimble and powerful all at once, whether it's weaving through a hail of bullets in your ship or sprinting through a room while eradicating a swarm of insectoid foes with a barrage of three-way fire from your palm.

As a sequel, *Velocity 2X* is rarely short of ideas. A recurring boss has a new trick every time you meet him, while one terrific late flourish arrives just three levels before the end. If it's a lesser game than *Velocity*, it's not for a lack of effort on FuturLab's part. That it leaves even the faintest taste of disappointment speaks volumes about the quality of the original design, and the consistently evident talent of its makers.

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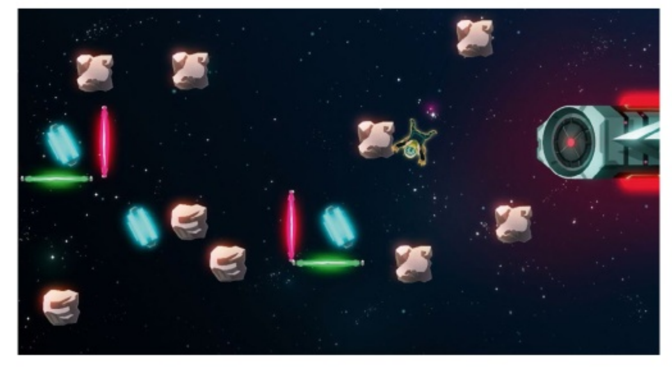


LEFT Transitions between exterior and interior sections are almost seamless. There's a brief period of mental readjustment in the early stages as you segue between the two, but you'll soon acclimatise. **MAIN** A shortcut for restarts is most welcome, as is the ability to teleport to the last pod you dropped with a double-tap of Triangle. The latter is even woven into some late-game puzzles. **BOTTOM** Tucked away in the world you'll find golden shards that unlock bonus levels. These mildly amusing puzzles are designed to be completed as quickly as possible





ABOVE The more challenging puzzle-led sections are a fine idea in and of themselves, but they don't always seem like a harmonious fit for a series where the ultimate metric for success has always been speed



Gods Will Be Watching

Gods Will Be Watching is tragic. As a pixel-art crisis management game that deals in the thematic murk of torture, human testing and terrorism, it was never exactly shooting for feel-good blockbuster, but that isn't what we mean. Across its handful of story vignettes, *GWBW* mistakes darkness for maturity, suffering for meaning, and barring progress for challenge. Identification can mask many of its failings, but a litany of structural problems spurn your readings and roleplay, making it a poor mirror.

That's doubly disappointing given the game's promising roots. *GWBW* was conceived at Ludum Dare 26 as a study in minimalism. With a single screen and a tiny set of interactions, you – as returning protagonist Sgt Burden – were given a handful of actions per day to keep a small team alive, sane, fed and disease-free on the surface of a hostile planet. You also, crucially, had a time limit and a radio to fix. The impossibility of keeping all the plates spinning forced you to face hard choices over what to let drop, while the slight structure left room for interpretation and personal reflection.

GWBW's fleshed-out remake betrays that as a fluke, detracting with almost every addition. In attempting to tell a continuing narrative, it squeezes out much of the room for introspection, drowning its echo chamber in reams of poorly spelled exposition and clever-clever self-referential exchanges. The story's structure also dictates that key characters can never truly die, but are simply set aside until the mission's end. The game winks coyly at this jarring serial reincarnation as if to excuse it, reserving a thinly veiled plot twist for the end, but neither diminishes the ruinous effect on your capacity for empathy or the relevancy of your choices.

In the vanilla game (see: 'Mercy mercy me'), those choices are many, and the systems behind them are by turns opaque, intriguing and irritatingly random – especially since failure means restarting these lengthy chapters wholesale, unskippable text and all. Progress soon devolves to base cryptography, with you discarding all engagement to figure out which set of actions will permit progress. That's on Easy, too; Original, with its passive-aggressive menu plea for selection, will have you grinding your teeth to powder. Tight constraints force you towards morally unpalatable options, yes, but so little freedom or consequence erodes the message.

If the browser version of *GWBW* is something of an allegory generator – demonstrating why killing someone to make your life easier rarely does, say – its remake is a game of 'Would you rather?' It's not afraid to ask the tough questions, but its framing of them is too clumsy to give you much reason to answer.

4

Publisher Devolver Digital
Developer Deconstructeam
Format PC
Release Out now



MERCY MERCY ME

After a wave of mixed feedback, Deconstructeam patched *GWBW* with the Mercy Update in early August. This offers a Puzzle Mode that eliminates the controversial random elements, and Puzzle Mode Light is an easier version of the same. Narrative Mode likewise lowers the difficulty to provide an easy path through the story. All are welcome options that can alleviate the frustration of multiple restarts, but the narrative problems endure.



The lab scenario offers no wiggle room over testing on someone; the only question is whom. But while the choice has the capacity to shock once, squeamishness is set aside when you realise no lasting harm is possible

80 Days

This interactive adaptation of Jules Verne's classic adventure is a roleplaying game in the true sense of the term. As its title suggests, *80 Days* tasks you with circumnavigating the globe quickly enough for Phileas Fogg to win his reckless wager; more surprising is how it affords you the rare pleasure of being able to shape the personality of an established literary figure.

In this instance, you're cast not as Fogg, but his valet, Passepartout. Starting with just £4,000 in funds, you're asked to pack as much as you can fit in a single suitcase before departing. The items you take can either be traded at markets for profit or kept for various benefits: the open-road set will make bumpy byways smoother, while the attire of a gentleman traveller may allow you to negotiate swifter passage. Set off and you'll see a monochromatic image of your chosen transport against a sky that cycles through vivid colours as the hours tick on, a red line tracing your route.

Your available destinations are determined by several factors. There's a thrill to discovering a new course, whether through conversation, investigation or by simply purchasing a booklet from a local market. You'll see ribbons dart across land and sea, each one representing an opportunity, and not only to reach your intended target sooner, but also to discover a new city, to meet new people, to take in fresh sights, sounds and smells, all evocatively described in sharp prose.

Wherever you land, you'll have decisions to make. Do you take a detour to sell a purloined cutlass for a tidy sum in Bangalore, or head straight to Delhi? You'll weigh up the need to carry valuable goods with the cost of conveyance. En route, you'll converse with captains, passengers and drivers, gleaning new routes and trading tips – though you'll also need to attend to your master, lest his health falters and you lose valuable days.

Yet Passepartout is defined more by words than by deeds. Passages of text often ask you to make choices that reflect his innermost thoughts, and the moments where he observes his environment or reminisces are as affecting as his evening escapades are humorous. In conversation, you can be aloof or cynical, inquisitive or enthusiastic, cautious or impulsive.

80 Days captures the original text's wide-eyed spirit of adventure, its fascination with the technological advancements of the time, and the wonders of the world itself. Before long, you'll be enjoying the journey too much to worry about completing your task in good time. Whether or not you succeed matters little; with over 100 cities left unexplored on your maiden voyage, as soon as you touch down in London, you'll immediately want to set off once more.

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Publisher/developer Inkle
Format iOS
Release Out now

THE TIMES

CELEBRATED ENGLISHMAN PHILEAS FOGG WINS ROUND-THE-WORLD WAGER

FOGG WARNING

While some delays can seem a little arbitrary, holdups often result in amusing anecdotes. Indeed, our first failed attempt concluded with our misfortunes documented in a newspaper clipping. A failed mutiny aboard a San Francisco-bound ship diverted to Honolulu cost us dear, while bribing the captain of a paddle steamer to speed up resulted in the overworked engine exploding. Forewarned is forearmed, and you'll know what to avoid on a return trip.



Travel details can be shared with fellow players. Tap any of the vehicle icons you'll find spread across the map and you'll be able to see the routes that others have chosen, as well as how long their journeys have taken

Metrico

Metrico is described by its makers as a game about 'infographics and free will', which is not only more auspicious than '2D indie puzzler' but also reasonably accurate. It is, of course, also a 2D indie puzzler, but one built on an unusually strong aesthetic of white space and data, the geometric visual grammar of the tech-literate and data-savvy.

The concept of free will sits close to the surface, too. In this blank void, traversed by a silhouetted male or female, numbers impose themselves architecturally, forming a series of traps and obstacles in the shape of bars and blocks, all part of a geography of information. It goes past philosophically suggestive and lands somewhere near clipart symbolism: our archetypal people are thwarted and harangued by numbers and our obsession with tracking and recording them.

The puzzling starts with a basic negotiation of this landscape. Soon things are hitched a conceptual notch, and the blank values attached to graphs and charts become measurements of the limited set of actions under your control: jumps, movement, shooting. Walking to the right might expand a horizontal percentage bar, jumping might grow a vertical one, shifting the pieces of puzzle around you until an exit appears. Progression depends on identifying the relationship between cause and effect – what are the elements of this trap recording? – and mastering a system in which each input has a double value, moving you and the objects you're navigating simultaneously.

Sometimes, however, the apparently intended solution feels like a fluke, teetering on the edge of replicable strategy. And the decision to weave the game's checkpoint system into the puzzling itself – where certain scenarios require resets and repositioning – muddies the clean sense of reward that's the expected payoff from a successfully solved puzzle.

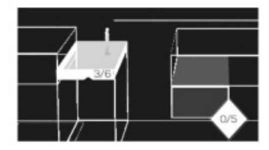
Still, such experimentation is evidence of *Metrico*'s playful layering of logic systems, a layering deepened by dusting off some of Vita's typically idle abilities. The rear screen is used for aiming, while later stages gauge the pitch and roll of the handheld itself in addition to your character's actions. The results vary: rotating the screen to various angles while trying to jump and aim can offer just the right sort of disorientation, but the pileup of inputs threatens to become overwhelming.

The sum of all *Metrico*'s graphs and equations is that it is more enjoyable to think about than to play. The pinch of chaos in the controls and collision systems means that grasping problems and finding solutions is the real joy, while implementing those solutions often feels a little too laborious.



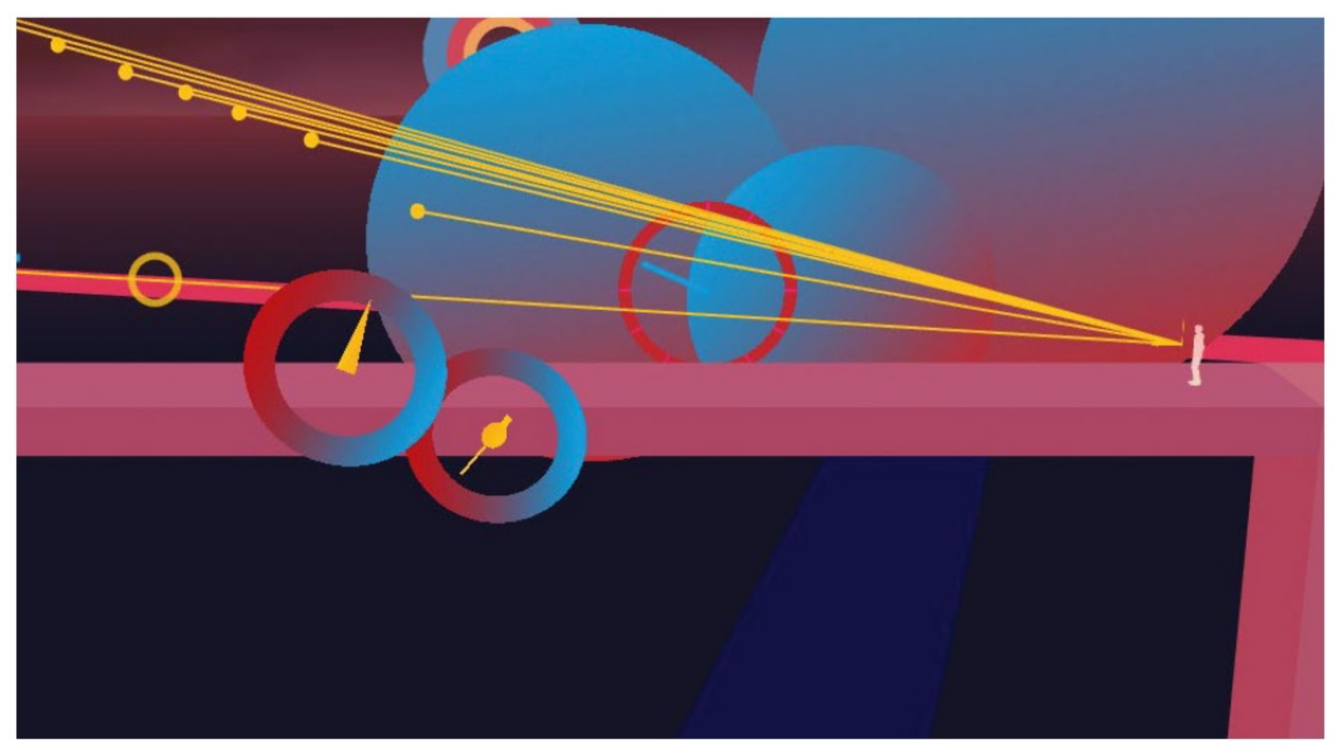
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Publisher SCEE
Developer Digital Dreams
Format Vita
Release Out now



MOOG PIECE

While *Metrico*'s puzzles are, at their best, beautifully intricate, the game's biggest achievement is its sustained uniformity of presentation. Within the infographic theme there are many clear influences, from Escher-esque wireframes to more abstract landscapes that evoke a grid-paper Picasso. The soundtrack is full of thoughtful electronica, which has some levels washed in Moog-ish synthesised lament, while others are filled with breathless digitised voices.



The silhouetted player character's abstract projectiles leave protractor-spread angles impressed on the screen, the languid action of the shots allowing for precisely timed jumps that fall between firing and impact





Dead Space

Why Isaac Clarke's toolbox of horrors is also a blue-collar manifesto

By Nathan Ditum

Publisher/developer EA (Redwood Shores) **Format** 360, PC, PS3 **Release** 2008

D*ead Space* was brought to us by EA in the same year as *Mirror's Edge*, during a short-lived spell of optimism when it seemed as though investing in new IP, rather than iterating big hitters such as *Call Of Duty* at the precise speed it takes a nation of 14-year-old boys to save up £40, might be the key to success in the game industry. This was never a realistic hope, but the upside is that we're left with *Dead Space*, a distinct and accomplished sci-fi original (even if it became a series that iterated itself into irrelevance by grasping for the attention of 14-year-old boys).

Dead Space is the grizzly end of sci-fi as learned from the blue-collar crew of Alien's Nostromo. The future, it says, will be a place where replacing washers and making sure humans can breathe in transgalactic flight will trump having a name like Dex Forearm and regenerative health. Its protagonist, Isaac Clarke, fixes things – trams, lifts, shuttles, navigation modules – and wears a rusty brown suit. As an engineer, he's likeably functional, and the game is commendably focused around him. His weapons are tools – cutters, saws, flamethrowers – and his enemies require precision dismemberment rather than undirected aggression. He is the earnest shed-dad on an autumn afternoon of videogame protagonists, and he lives in a satisfyingly unglamorous future of realistic moving parts designed with brilliant cohesion and striking visuals.

All of which there is to say there's a purity to *Dead Space*, and its science fiction; an efficiency of character, presentation, and even language. The game's opening scene is a model of sharp exposition that introduces tensions, objectives and personal sub-plots, while throwing in a world-building set of just-graspable jargon ("planet cracker", "gravity tethers"). There's a confidence here too, all calmly taken in from the single-shot perspective of a cockpit overlooking a dramatic scene: a broken planet, a crippled ship, and a scattered debris field, all glowingly backlit by a dazzling sun.

This is a world not in need of a hero so much as a man-shaped set of working parts. Clarke achieves the ultimate efficiency of language by remaining silent throughout, and his face isn't shown until the game's last scene (even then, he looks flabbergasted rather than prominently jawed). Whether by design or necessity – the game's initial prototype was scraped together by a small team using borrowed tech – Clarke is as much a tool as the improvised weapons he uses to dice his enemies.

While there's an elegance to Clarke's simplicity, there's a corresponding richness to the sophisticated world *Dead Space* builds around him. The game's basic blocks of interaction, its sound effects and UI design, superbly convey a sense of both futurism and functionality. Again, something is owed to Alien here, and to the analogue future as collectively imagined by Hollywood on the burgeoning fringe of the blockbuster era in the 1970s and 1980s – a future of burbling pips and squawks, of holographic interfaces and workshop textures. It not only captures the same truth revealed by John Carpenter's Dark Star and George Lucas's Star Wars (that when we get to the future everything will look worn and you might have to slap the dash to hit light speed), but does it with such accomplished uniformity that every menu navigated, every door opened, and every machine worked intensifies the reality of the world, and the hold it has on us.

Except it's not really a world but a single ship, navigated in decks like the floors of a haunted house (that the means of travel between decks is a tram is just perfect). Welcome to the USG Ishimura. Like Alien's Nostromo, it is a mining vessel, and like the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, it hails ahead to a possible internationally conglomerated destiny. It's also a densely packed warehouse of clichés, and so it's testament to the game's other qualities that we barely notice. The ship's geography is dominated by strobe-lit grey corridors and grand guignol monuments of splayed carcasses that recall a litany of antecedents from *Doom* to Event Horizon. They are, however, occasionally and spectacularly interrupted by defining moments of originality: a disorienting fight in a debris-strewn anti-grav chamber, or the frantic traversal of the ship's hull set against the sucking blackness of space. ▶

The thoroughness of the game is apparent in these space walks, where the sound of everything except Clarke's ragged breathing is swallowed in the vacuum. Again, the best of *Dead Space* is lean and stripped, and it's with this minimalism that the game contextualises the horrors Clarke encounters. Revealed through logs and text files – crude necessities of narrative, though well deployed here – we learn of Unitology, a cult-like religion involved in the recovery of the alien artefact behind the game's transformative horrors. Crucially, we're not given specifics, just a taste of fanaticism and a hint of conspiracy. It's enough to ambiguously shade what are already mysterious events. Subtler still are veiled nods towards the wider state of our society four centuries from now, in the Ishimura's various propagandist public service announcement posters. "Where would you be without science?" beams one, a bright-faced technician smiling out above a pile of skinless cadavers. There's a heavy echo of Philip K Dick in their enforced optimism ("We can remember it for you wholesale!"), and they say a great deal, without saying anything in particular, about the arrangement of people and power needed to drag humanity into space.

The best thing about all this is that Clarke doesn't care. Instead, he has his rusty suit and a long job sheet of things to fix and do, which expands to include cutting the arms and legs off most of what used to crew the Ishimura. The thematic consistency of *Dead Space* is really clinched by its weaponry and enemies, and the combat that brings them together. Clarke's inventory is a toolbox of sharp, hot things jury-rigged for survival, and key among these sharp, hot things is the Plasma Cutter. In one sense, *Dead Space* is an iteration of *Resident Evil 4*, and the Plasma Cutter is a natural successor to Capcom's laser-sighted pistol, now with three blue lasers rather than a single red one. But it's more than that, too – it's a potent symbol of Clarke's unfussy heroism, a small, effective tool (upgraded properly, it's the only gun you'll need) with a simple, practical embellishment of a revolving head that turns the strip of blue lasers from vertical to horizontal and back again with a satisfying bleep.

The practicality of this revolving head only becomes truly obvious once Clarke encounters the necromorphs. These too-human aberrations are a shotgun-wound wedding of Stan Winston's creature effects in Carpenter's The Thing and the distorted figures of Francis Bacon's second Triptych – writhing examples of fallen man in furious agony. Yes, we're essentially talking about space zombies, but space zombies with pedigree, as well as razor-like scythes for elbows and distended, snapping jaws. The game's persistent stroke of genius is that brute force won't deter them – what's needed is accurate dismemberment and disposal. This is where the punchy Plasma



Distinctive diegetic UI design characterises *Dead Space*. This translucent holographic menu is far more memorable than the generic security lunk beyond it, though both he and his moustache aren't long for this world

DEAD SPACE IS A GAME WITH A POINT OF VIEW – THAT BUILDING THINGS IS VALUABLE, THAT DESIGN IS BEAUTIFUL

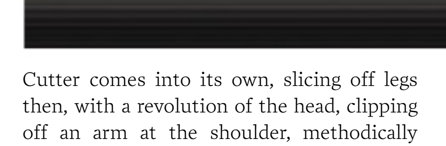




TOP **Posing Isaac outside in the nothingness of space runs the risk of suffocation, but those views almost make the restart worth it.** ABOVE **The opening scene is a perfect mix of minute dramas of practicality inside the cockpit and the sublime indifference of space beyond**

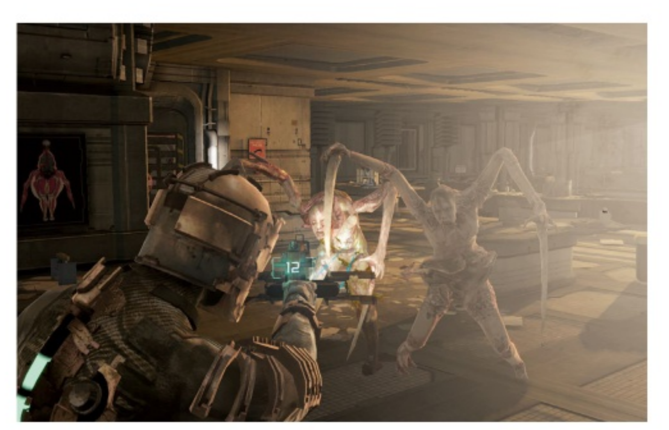
BENCH MARK

The bench is the mechanism through which *Dead Space* offers up weapon customisation (and did so before the idea spiralled into tiresome complexity). There are choices to be made here, in the unfolding engineer's workshop, with upgrade paths for each of Clarke's weapons to make them more damaging, quicker to reload, quicker to fire, or packed with more ammunition. The crucial thing is that the limits of the system are well-defined, so these choices are meaningful – and thus they undermine the conventional shooter progression from gun to ever-more-powerful gun. Here it's possible to stick with Clarke's first and simplest tool, the Plasma Cutter, and transform it into a potent instrument of dissection. It's another example of *Dead Space*'s thematic unity that this take on weaponry is delivered through the medium of a workbench.



Cutter comes into its own, slicing off legs then, with a revolution of the head, clipping off an arm at the shoulder, methodically cleaving along the horizontal and vertical.

This gives combat a purpose over and above the simple deployment of as much ordnance as possible in the shortest time. Each kill becomes a small, crafted piece of handiwork, and when combined with other armaments and Clarke's supplementary abilities, it results in a layered model of combat that's skilful in a way few horror games manage. Initially, the necromorphs come in twos or threes, but by the midway point they'll be invading rooms in waves, squirming from vents and pouring from the ceiling in multidirectional ambushes. At these moments, the full range of Clarke's toolset is stretched, and there's a grim man-with-hammer satisfaction in switching between powers and weapons to select the right thing for the job. You'll slow onrushers with Clarke's Stasis power, clear a cloud of crawling parasites with the flamethrower, telekinetically toss a propane canister into a crowd, and switch to the trusty Plasma Cutter to harvest the survivors. Having borrowed so much from Alien, *Dead Space* solves the problem official adaptations of that series tend to have: how do you keep your inhumanly lethal monster individually terrifying when at some point our hero needs to take on ten of them at a time? The answer is with a dextrous, skill-based approach to combat that makes it feel like you're surgically crafting your way to safety.



Everything good about *Dead Space* comes from its underlying cohesion, which binds the no-nonsense stomp of Issac's iron suit to the Bronx drawl of the engineer whose audio logs clue you into the necromorphs' weakness. *Dead Space* is a game with a point of view – that building things is valuable, that design is beautiful, and that the smallest details in the mechanisms through which we interact with the world can have the biggest impact. It's a game about resourcefulness and repair, about precision and craft, about how default heroism is boring and how a real protagonist should *do* things. And it reminds us, graphically, that when everything goes to Hell and a collection of razor limbs with a human face scuttles at you, being able to mend a flex is going to be pretty handy. ■





JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Behold the land of Eragor – thousands of square miles of beautifully realised landscape. There are towns, villages, woods, rivers and mountains. And at its heart, a mighty citadel called The Mighty Citadel. I haven't thought of a better name for it yet, but the point is, this is quite a setting for an RPG.

And the story is as sprawling as the land. Everywhere you travel, there'll be characters, magic and combat. In the deep woodlands, the dwarves dwell. Under high, icy peaks, elves forge metal weapons of unimaginable power. And under the shallow seas of Shallowsea, there are armies of men. All this was my idea: I argued we should do something different. The team bought it because it was utterly original.

And around Eragor there are The Six, powerful mages who hold the key to controlling the land and defeating the evil hordes of ercs. These horribly misshapen beings pour forth from the sunny, canal-crossed grasslands in the west, under the rule of the all-seeing Sormon. Again, note that it's grasslands – this is totally unlike any other story that has ever existed.

As the writer, I've got the worst PC in the building. And that includes the car body shop on the first floor still using an oily-print-stained 386 to produce invoices. I've done much of the dialogue, though – not on this thing; mostly on my phone as I sit on the train to and from the studio. Now it's time to explore the world of Eragor and see how the story works in situ.

I start on a Tuesday morning. By Wednesday, I'm nearly out of the first town. The game is huge, the computer slow, and the NPCs are too chatty. What I need is a cheat to move me around faster. And to my rescue comes a programmer called Mick. It's not his real name. No programmer has ever been called Mick. Mick's coding combat AI, but he looks keen to help me get places quicker.

Mick enthusiastically knocks up something he calls KestrelCam, a mode that lets you rise up and fly around the world of Eragor using the cursor keys. It's fast, brilliant and I can finally get to see all the locations and marvel at all the great things the characters there say.



> This is still at an early stage, Mick informs me. He's working on moving feathery control surfaces at the moment

Towards the end of the week, Mick beckons me over. He's been refining KestrelCam. Instead of using cursor keys to slide around the game mechanically, you can now swoop, bank and smoothly ascend or descend. Mick plugs in a force-feedback joystick to demonstrate this. It does look good. Then he toggles a key and turns on what looks like a greyish-brown pillow at the front lower part of the screen. As he banks left, this pillow swivels in the same direction and reveals itself to be the back of a kestrel's head, looking where he's flying. I gasp in pleasure. The game doesn't require a kestrel, and it would render the whole adventure pointless if you could zoom around on one, but I'm impressed that Mick bothered to put the bird in, even if it is only the back of its head.

Days later, Mick calls me across again. He fires up KestrelCam and it's even smoother. And with a proud keypress, he turns on a cockpit display. Fringed tastefully in feathers, this has an altitude readout, airspeed, various navigation displays and a warning panel should any one of five things go wrong in flight. In short, it's a work of fluffy genius.

Mick updates KestrelCam on my PC, and it's even easier to find my way across the forests and hills of Eragor to refine the words spoken by the people there. I can't check on the combat taunts, reactions and general dialogue because the combat AI doesn't seem to be working yet. That's only about a quarter of the whole story, so I go back to swooping low over the Mighty Citadel. I even discover by accident that hitting the K key causes the bird to emit a rather chilling squawk.

Again, the days pass and the deadlines loom. Late one night, I stroll over to Mick to tell him about the squawk. He's pleased I found it and makes me sit down next to him. My eyes widen. KestrelCam now has retractable talons for landing, a kind of raptor radar to detect other birds (of which there appear to be none), a raft of power options, a map-linked autopilot, three different squawk settings and the ability to set up to 256 waypoints anywhere in Eragor.

KestrelCam also has 360-degree external views, and you can even zoom out and see the majestic bird itself. This is still at an early stage, Mick informs me. He's working on implementing visible moving feathery control surfaces at the moment.

After a few days spent working from home, I come back in to find the game has slipped. Someone else is at Mick's desk, furiously coding combat AI. Mick's stuff has gone. And from that day to this, whenever I look up and see a bird of prey hovering above a hedgerow, I remind myself what an idiot Mick was.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

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Shigeru Miyamoto takes to the skies in the lobby of Nintendo's new R&D building in Kyoto, Japan, July 25, 2014